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Salò or The 120 Days of Sodom

(Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma)

Gary Indiana



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FOR VICTOR A. KOVNER

When pornography abandons its quality of existential solitude and moves out of the kitsch area of timeless, placeless fantasy and into the real world, then it loses its function of safety valve. It begins to comment on the real world.

Angela Carter



'These foolish things remind me of you'

Salò

1

I was twenty-seven when I first saw Pasolini's *Salò*. I worked nights at the popcorn concession of the Westland Twins, a Laemmle theatre in Westwood specialising in foreign films of the 'mature romance' variety. A friend managed The Pico, an art cinema in the Fairfax District. It was autumn, 1977. I got off work at 10.30. I usually drove home to Los Angeles, stopping at The Pico, where *Salò* ran that season as a midnight movie. (Actually, I think it was an eleven o'clock midnight movie.) That's how I happened to see this film, or parts of it, almost every night for two months.

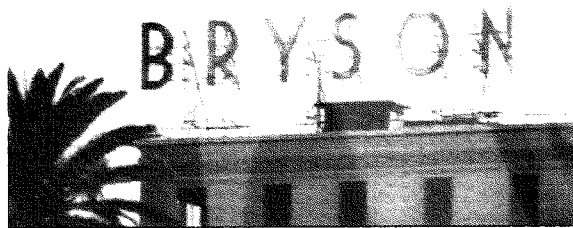
I have a terribly spotty memory. This has served me pretty well as a writer, since I have to fill the yawning gaps between what I truly remember with whatever my imagination suggests 'must have happened'. I remember that melancholy period of my life in time-stained flickers, a slide show of faces and landscapes across a paling light. I was twenty-seven, but I think of myself then as 'pre-conscious'. The world was just beginning to emerge as something separate from the muck of my private anxieties. I went to the movies all the time. I believed that the emotions projected in films and dramatised in popular songs were the same emotions I had. I felt tremendous nostalgia for a history I didn't possess, for loves I'd never experienced, for bitter lessons I'd never learned.

One of the few places where you could get a drink after a certain hour was a Silver Lake bar called The Headquarters, an S&M club where police impersonators in uniform mingled with dowdier slaves and masters in dog collars and trouserless chaps (Leather had had its major effulgence much earlier in Los Angeles, celebrated in the classic fistfucking porno, *LA Plays Itself*, and in movies by Wakefield Poole. By the late 70s the hardcore raunch scene was more happening in New York and San Francisco.) There were also the One Way, The Detour, The Spike, a constellation of more conventional gay bars at the nether end of East Hollywood. The punk scene was in full mood swing. One of the only boutiques on now-famous Melrose Avenue was a tiny storefront called Tokyo Rose, where you could buy pre-ripped T-shirts festooned with safety pins.

During the day, I worked at Legal Aid in Watts. A dispiriting job. I dealt with seriously damaged, desperately poor people who lived in rotting bungalows where rats routinely fell through crumbling ceilings into their breakfast cereal. I lived in a somewhat sinister apartment hotel on Wilshire (The Bryson, where Stephen Frears shot *The Grifters* many years later, simulating its mid-70s desuetude – when I lived there, Fred MacMurray was the silent partner in the building's ownership) full of insomniacs, drifters, madmen, a kind of Chelsea West: the night clerk was a preoperative transsexual named Stephanie.

It was a time of compulsive, almost mechanical sleeping around that felt good for a few moments here and there. I had two jobs, and about two

The Bryson, the haunted castle of my youth, reconstituted in *The Grifters*



hours at the end of the night to pick someone up in a bar. Whatever followed that took at least two more hours, depending on the drive time, so I suppose in that faraway autumn of 1977 I got an average of three hours sleep a night. That was my life, and *Salò* became for two months a logical part of it, another little patch of soft, crumbly alienation and waking dream.

2

The Pico is long gone, The Bryson is currently draped in scaffolding and sandblasting paraphernalia, and soon will become a warren of pricey condominiums. (Since writing this line, the drapery has vanished. By the time you read this, the empty units will be full.) And the plangent backwater atmosphere of Los Angeles in the 70s is long gone, too,

replaced by a horror vacui of gentrification and millions more motor vehicles, the most egregious being tank-scale SUVs piloted by small, angry, recently divorced women who launch their own private Chechnya into traffic whenever they leave the house.

I don't propose to endlessly revisit my first encounters with *Salò*, or fold them into an autobiography, but I do want to 'personalise' it at the outset, before proceeding with an unavoidable flurry of notes on Pasolini, movies and shifts in the cultural temperature from one period to the next – notes, I should add, that will probably not win me any friends among film scholars or Pasolini experts. I am not fluent in Italian, so there are myriad nuances in Pasolini's work that I can neither perceive nor contextualise. I no longer live immersed in movies as I once did, and I confess that much of what I found wonderful twenty or thirty years ago no longer holds much interest for me. Re-viewing all of Pasolini's films after many years, I found that I could only revisit my affection for some of them through an effort of somewhat dubious nostalgia, by 'remembering the 60s' (I saw most of Pasolini's movies, though obviously not this one, in the 60s) and the chaos of a completely different cultural moment. On the other hand, films that I hadn't cared much about when I first saw them – *Notes for an African Oresteia*, *Oedipus Rex* – now impressed me as truly uncanny works of cinematic poetry.

It's tricky to consider one of Pasolini's films in isolation, because he occupies so much space as a figure. At the same time, the energy that collects around big, imposing names in the cultural suet deserves a measure of scepticism. Once artists become monuments, the required way of regarding them is almost absurdly contrary to our way of regarding anything else. We are obliged to find worlds of meaning in every scrap of paper they might have doodled on, any material sign of their existence turns into manna. The resulting industry of preservation, worthy as it is, has the paradoxical effect of killing any spontaneous encounter with their work. Are we genuinely moved by Mozart's music, or are we moved because we know that Mozart's music is moving? Is the publication of Kafka's *Blue Notebooks* a revelation, or evidence that not everything an artist does is worth preserving?

3

Pasolini's total body of work is a vast, erratic sprawl of things – essays, poems, novels, newspaper columns, paintings, drawings, films, and I hate to think what else. As one of perhaps two dozen directors doing unusual 'personal' movies in the 60s and 70s, he was part of a heterodox, liberating wave, someone whose films could be welcomed as elements of a wide-ranging spirit of revolt. In their temporal setting, they didn't need to be closely understood or analysed to be appreciated.

As a young American viewer, I only understood Pasolini's films to be about things that weren't explored in American movies. They were quirky and subversive of narrative expectations, informed by a highly eccentric reading of Marx and Freud. Like Godard's films, they approached storytelling in a completely idiosyncratic way, they dared to look amateurish and indulged in all sorts of obvious fetishism. The camera eye in Pasolini's films conveyed a blatant sexual interest in his male actors, of a whole different order than the Hollywood truism that 'a movie star is somebody a lot of people want to fuck'. Erotic interest in the male body was still elaborately dissembled in most movies, coded, deflected by heterosexual love stories and exploitation of the female body. Pasolini's films were coded, too, but not coded enough for the subtext to be at all ambiguous. At the same time, at least part of what I liked about Pasolini's movies, back then, was their opacity. (One thing people tend to forget about the 60s – which ended in one sense in 1969, but in another sense around 1975 – is how grossly inarticulate all the hip people really were. A small number of expressions were used to say everything. No one had to explain in real language what they understood about anything; if they tried, they were likely to reveal an incredible poverty of thought. *Teorema* was 'far out'. Beginning and end of discussion.)

Two and a half decades after his death, Pasolini has the sacred aura of a 'figure', an object of research, a dessicated collection of 'meanings'. To talk about *Salò*, I want to avoid any too-technical interrogation of Pasolini's methodology, and not fall into the trap of assuming that his intentions are entirely realised in his work, or that *Salò* needs to be viewed through the scrim of his other films, his poetry, his novels, etc. Everything

he did does not hold equal interest. Travelling exhibitions of his pleasant, unexceptional paintings don't enhance the experience of his films. They burnish the cult of the proper name, add volume to the idea of 'genius' that so often makes the experience of art into an embalming exercise.

4

If I do have something to say about Pasolini's life and work, it's mostly to get Pasolini-as-figure out of the way, pay whatever homage is due that erotic relation to proper names that typifies contemporary discourse and muddies 'the thing itself'. (Proper names have taken the place of 'far out' for at least two decades.) I have mixed feelings about Pasolini's overall production and the obstinate anhedonia of his relation to the contemporary world. If there is much to admire about him, there is a good deal less to genuinely like, at least in the unqualified way that I like a film-maker like Buñuel, whose sense of life is far more generative, engaging and empathetic. By the same token, I love *Salò* (and hate it), which seems, in its vehemence and negativity, its utterly black humour, a repudiation of everything cloying and pretentious in Pasolini's other work.

5

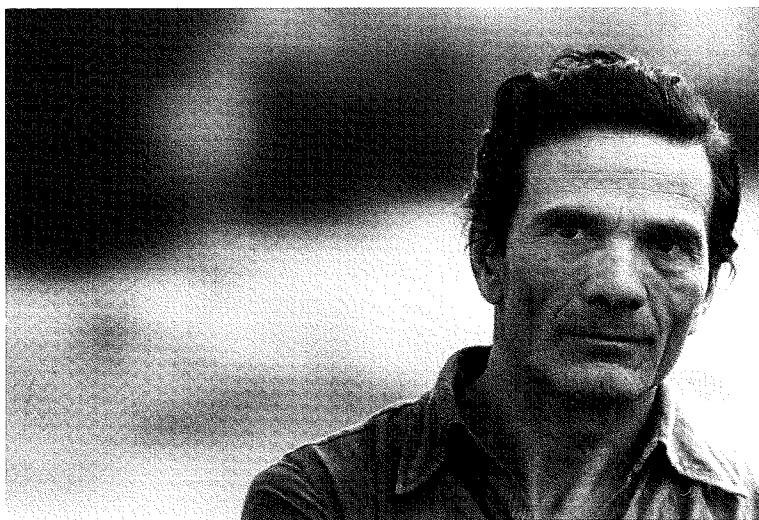
Salò is one of those rare works of art that really achieves shock value. Aesthetic shock does have a salutary value, and it's always amusing to read the outpourings of some cultural wastebasket decrying an artist who deploys shock 'for the sake of shock', as if to qualify as a work of art, a work of art has to be something other than a work of art – a tutorial in cherished homilies, an affirmation of quotidian values, and so on. I don't think art has anything to do with morality and it shouldn't: I should be able to kill everybody I don't like in a novel and get away with it, rape a twelve-year-old and piss on my father's grave. It's not my job to tell anybody that these things are 'wrong'. It's my job to show that these things happen, period.

Certain works yank the rug from under the meticulously planted furniture of middle-class morality and the aesthetic torpor that decorates it.



John Waters's *Pink Flamingos*, Jean Rouch's *Les Maîtres fous*, Georges Franju's *Le Sang des Bêtes*, Andy Warhol's *Blue Movie*, anything by Hershel Gordon Lewis, scattered moments in the films of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Jonas Mekas – well, you can make your own list of things that lifted the top of your head off. I'm not sure that anyone is obliged to like works of art that fall into this category, or that liking them is ever entirely the point, though critics, quite often, mistake the celebration of the ghastly as an 'indictment of contemporary malaise', etc. – in other words, they can only like something if it can be bent to reflect their own moral certainties.

One way that *Salò* differs from the unabashedly perverse epiphanies of the cinema of shock is in its pedantic moralism, which might have ruined



Pink Flamingos: shock has its own salutary value; Pasolini



it if the shock part didn't so thoroughly overwhelm the moralism. There is something absurdly winning about Pasolini's explanation of the shit-eating in *Salò* as a commentary on processed foods, and the fact that Pasolini was being sincere when he said it. And if you think about it, his interpretation is essentially reasonable, though it's hardly the first thing a viewer thinks when watching a roomful of people gobbling their own turds.

6

The atmosphere of scandal that misted *Salò* when it appeared was an aerosol of semen, excrement and blood. *Salò* was awash in come and shit. The blood was Pasolini's. His murder, a gruesome affair involving a nail-studded fence picket and his own sports car, struck many as all of a piece with the sadomasochism of his last movie, and with a well-advertised lifetime of patronising rough trade. One French reviewer urged that *Salò* be shown as a defence exhibit at the murderer Pelosi's trial,¹ on the assumption that anybody capable of directing such a film was practically begging to be murdered.

This coincidental intersection of art and life, or art and death,

Conspicuous consumption

became an inevitable ending, especially in a right-wing Italian press that loathed Pasolini. Once he was dead and past defending himself, the ugliest opinions about him surfaced. Was his open homosexuality the inspiration behind the denunciations and court cases that dogged his career, starting long before the segue from poet and novelist to film-maker? If we consider the artistic fortunes of a Franco Zeffirelli, it appears that only *the wrong kind of faggot* – a Leftist rather than a reactionary, an intellectual instead of a flaming queen, someone who inserted himself in politics, took unpopular positions, made himself vulnerable – would have come in for the judicial harassment and vicious attacks that Pasolini did. While it can fairly be said that no artist of any prominence in Italy, Zeffirelli included, is ever uninvolved in politics on a quotidian level – almost nowhere else on earth is daily life subjected to such beetling, unrelieved ideological nattering – Pasolini's interventions were extreme and unflagging, pleasing to practically nobody across the political spectrum, and, uniquely, were intricately inscribed with the fact of his sexual difference.

Pasolini's faggotry gave his presence on the political scene a salient abrasiveness and force. His intellectual fluency made him dangerous. Being smarter than his enemies, he could always justify making himself a pain in the ass, and he could count on the press, the church, the courts, and the provincial yokels he spent so much energy glorifying in other contexts, to take the bait. Even a reverential film of Matthew's Gospel became a scandal *because of what Pasolini was*, what he represented in Italy, a signifier of decadence, the epitome of things that were more or less unmentionable in public. 'People didn't miss comparing my *Messiah* with Pasolini's *Gospel According to St Matthew*, where you see Christ buggering pigs,'² Roberto Rossellini declared when his indifferently thrown-together Jesus movie tanked at the box office.

This isn't to ignore the shrewd calculation involved in the making of *The Gospel According to St Matthew*: among other things, it was a blatant effort to disarm Pasolini's critics in the Catholic church. Nor should we overlook the fact that every indecency charge and prosecution enlarged Pasolini's celebrity, that in the world he moved in such opposition accrues tremendous cultural capital.

Pasolini was quick, and right, to use the word 'racism' to describe a certain kind of criticism launched against him, which emanated from the perception of his 'essence' as a pervert. He was a target of racism, in this sense, from his earliest days as a teacher, when he was charged with molesting four of his teenage students. One provocation of *Salò*, like the X portfolio of Robert Mapplethorpe, is its ability to flush this racism into the open, revealing the limits of repressive tolerance – that social threshold of shock that says, *We'll accept you if you become like us, love like us, talk like us, believe like us, hate like us*.

Today, in a limited number of contexts, in a small number of industrialised countries, there is nothing especially controversial about homosexuality *per se*: it can even be used to sell vodka and designer clothing. The same-sex enthusiast who wants to be integrated into the status quo (and everything this implies) can order from the same lifestyle menu as other citizens, with some professional and legal restrictions that will almost certainly fade away with time. On the other hand, those who, like Pasolini, are led by their deviance into a feeling of solidarity with less readily assimilable objects of racism (the expendable populations of the Third World, for example), and from there to a systemic critique of capitalism and its global effects, find themselves at odds with nearly everything in the consumer society. Repressive tolerance has returned much of the gay world – to speak only of that – to the voiceless, irrelevant pathology of the period before gay liberation, with the difference being that today's gay can celebrate that pathology (fascistic worship of perfect bodies, contempt for the sexually superannuated, libidinal narcissism) with the same fearlessness that normal people celebrate their worship of money and consumer goods, without the intrusion of humanist ethics or any sense of social justice. These have become loser concepts in the current climate, knocked to the periphery of consciousness by the G-force of McLuhan's locked 'n' loaded global village.

7

Pasolini identified with the losers of the global economy. He used his sexual difference as a tool of analysis, a goad to empathy. In this sense,



his homosexuality was a far more potent quantity than the open gayness of any number of contemporary writers, film-makers, actors and CEOs. A different quantity, certainly, than the homosexuality of people clamouring to join the military, serve in their nation's intelligence services and police forces, enter the clergy or participate in the sham of family values by lobbying for marriage and adoption rights. Pasolini's sexual identity, by the same token, is rarely reflected in his work as a source of pleasure (aside from transient orgasmic pleasure), and, fused as it was in his personality to a realm of suffering, inflects his work with melancholy and morbidity, even though his writing, and his camera, lavished excited attention on the bodies, faces and genitals of boys and men.

Never the type of drama queen this description may suggest, Pasolini was brash and forward about his desires, but clear about where they placed him in the pecking order. Cursed with the imperial ego of an

The dark side of the gay marriage issue

ambitious artist, he found his triumph in persecution. He didn't care to win in any vulgar sense, but to lodge an indelible protest against the winning side of history. I suppose this is where a kind of fissure opens, where I begin to find aspects of Pasolini's project artistically dubious. His commitment to a Gramscian political model deforms and limits his work while giving it valuable social currency. I don't question his sincerity, or necessarily disagree with his politics, not exactly, but ... there is a place where art and politics merge rather strangely and disappointingly, and I find myself wondering what the great Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz would have thought of Pasolini. Would he have said that Pasolini had taught himself to strike noble poses until the poses began to look natural?

There is such a mixture of motives and curious impulses at work in Pasolini, *longueurs* that take your breath away and others that make you wince. In the words of Gombrowicz, discussing Balzac's *Human Comedy*: 'To think how easily the best soup gets spoiled when one adds a spoonful of old grease or a bit of toothpaste to it.'³ And with Pasolini, it might not even be grease or toothpaste, but some misbegotten Brechtian fiddling with sightlines, or his endless indulgence of Ninetto Davoli, whose implacably sunny exuberance is often wearying. Still, Pasolini's elemental weirdness and audacity sustain interest (if not always sympathetic interest) through all but his most trying inventions. Like Paradzhanov, he is deeply, seductively cryptic: the more exposed, the more concealed, as if signalling from a world that can only be glimpsed in fragments.

There is the problem, however, when sifting through 'the archival Pasolini', that his allies and associates, Moravia and others, anxious to keep his work alive, have tended to flatten out his inconsistencies and interpret every weakness as a subtle strength. This applies to Pasolini's personal legend as well as his work. Because *of course* there is a laughable contradiction between Pasolini's self-righteous polemics on behalf of the oppressed, particularly on behalf of urban street youth (he is ever concerned about these 'boys' and their likely fates, but largely indifferent to what their 'girls' have to put up with), and the fact that he perfectly fits the cliché of the rich fag European director, in sunglasses and Alfa-Romeo, prowling midnight Roman streets for juvenile cock. It would be healthier,

and in the end better for Pasolini's legacy, not to insist so much on his saintliness: better to say he was riddled with contradictions, like most people, a little too full of improving jeremiads for the rest of the world, and suffered just a bit too histrionically the pain of people he didn't really know (though the fact that he thought he did probably killed him). *And* used his fame and money to get sex from good-looking street trade. This doesn't really spoil him for me.

8

Pasolini located utopian pleasure, as opposed to the quickie, in an absence: the preindustrial, the rustic, the anti-modern. He spent his early years in the Friulian region north of Venice, near the Alps and the Yugoslav border. Although his family was middle class, early exposure to the agrarian subculture formed his lasting idea of social happiness. His first sexual encounters happened with farm boys. The early years of his literary work were dedicated to writing in, and preserving, Friulian dialect. After World War II, the waning of regional identities under the pressure of industrialisation, the decline of dialects as the Italian language became homogenised by mass media (linguistic homogenisation had also been an important goal of the fascists), were for Pasolini catastrophes beyond reckoning, an 'anthropological genocide'.

Pasolini romanticised this lost childhood world, while remaining aware that it was a romance and not a recuperable reality.⁴ He became a scourge to everything that replaced it, to the extent that his hatred of the bourgeoisie became its own intricately rationalised form of racism. I'm aware of the argument that only the powerless can be victims of racism, but then, even a bourgeois may be powerless in his individual circumstances. And Pasolini typically attacked the kinds of individuals created by the middle class, as well as the class itself and its inherent ideology.

His screeds against the system of life around him have a fascinatingly tortured and triumphant logic. Yet his polemics read as bitterly useless, a refusal of reality that, cumulatively, has less to do with trying to actually change things than with proving the virtuousness of the attack. Pasolini wants his readers and viewers not simply to question themselves, but to

hate themselves. This asks a bit more than most people can manage.

One can't ignore the programmatic and prescriptive qualities of his work. To assign a specific class identity to a style of gesture, a hair colour, the set of a face, as Pasolini habitually does in his writing (such identifications are 'proven' in the films unobtrusively, by *mise en scène*), can work as a semiotic epiphany, but can also be the symptom of an overdetermining didacticism. There is a language of class, a language of gesture, a language of genetic morphology, but the codes of these languages are hardly a science, and human beings are not as predictable as their clothing might suggest. Pasolini was very seduced by a 'scientistic' way of look at and writing about films; this 'scientism' informed the way he made films as well, with mixed results.

Even in his lightest works (and they are few), Pasolini constructs a case, sometimes elaborately layered, in favour of a more 'natural', presumably more innocent, form of social organisation, and against the middle class. Perhaps because of the intrinsic contradictions of this case (Pasolini is bourgeois, his audience is bourgeois, the preindustrial paradise he recommends to us is in reality full of bigotry and ignorance as well as an 'organic' connection to nature), his moments of joy seem meticulously or militaristically planned.

The vignettes of subproletarian and agrarian life, masterfully organised and crowded with earthy details, hypnotise the viewer with exoticism, then, quite often, display an excessively laboured 'spontaneity'



Inventing a bucolic idyll in *Canterbury Tales*

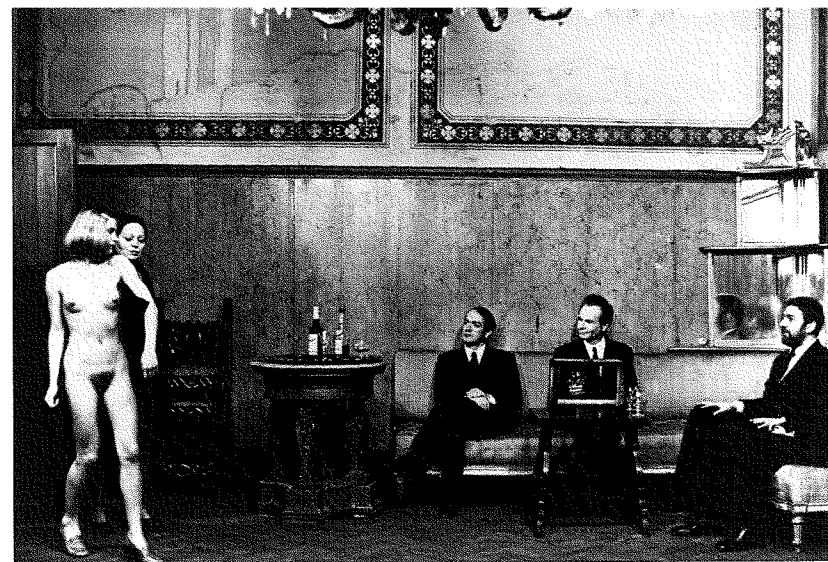
that works as a sort of blackmail against the kind of middle-class viewer who normally sees Pasolini's films. The reifying nostalgia for the imaginary primitive, for a place where spitting and puking and farting and fucking all happen uninhibitedly in the public square (or just off the public square), for the Rabelaisian-bucolic, extorts a response to the 'natural' that is, necessarily, completely unnatural. People don't live the way Pasolini felt they should. Given his somewhat incongruous streak of Calvinism, I suspect that if they had, he would have despised them anyway.

But in the fictitious long-ago evoked in so many of his films, a masochistic obsequence to this 'naturalness' is enough at times to qualify his work as Marxist kitsch. I'm speaking here of Pasolini's least ingratiating quirks, and might as well note that the comedic and the carnal often fizzle in these movies, as if he found the less cerebral facets of his sensibility politically sensitive. One sees, often, an *idea* of sensuality instead of sensuality, a *concept* of comedy. A lot of Chaplin just isn't funny any more, but because Pasolini locates 'natural' humour in the figure of Chaplin (as well as a type of political rectitude), a typical effort at comedy in Pasolini's films will be ... *Chaplinesque*.

As Sam Rohdie writes, 'His intellectuality was such that life, even in his films, or especially in his films, was dead, the flesh pale and pasty, almost revolting ... It made sex seem, if not obscene or absurd, certainly unpleasant.'⁵ This is emphatically the case with *Salò*, which thematically wants to close the door on 60s utopianism and its promise to liberate the body, though the film's actual effect is really very ambiguous. What *Salò* frequently looks like is self-revulsion pushed to an insane limit of absurdity, and beyond, into an absurd kind of self-acceptance. Or at least, this is one way of looking at it.

9

Salò doesn't explain Pasolini's murder, though the killing was obviously 'Pasolinian', a tale of two classes, the slumming celebrity and the street whore, one that Pasolini had depicted in one milder version or another many times. More than one reporter wrote that if Pasolini were somehow looking on afterwards, he would have sided with the murderer Pelosi,



who might have stepped out of any of Pasolini's novels, and could easily have been cast in *Salò*. The observation is utterly credible, and pinpoints, in a way, what is admirable and stupid about a utopian political *parti pris* when applied to real life.

Pasolini's sensational death unavoidably fixes the meaning of his life. 'Death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives,' he wrote. 'It is only thanks to death that our life serves to express ourselves.'⁶ *Salò* emits a certain ghostly effect as an end-piece. It would look different if other Pasolini films had followed it, especially if these non-existent films had been entirely different. From the statements Pasolini made about *Salò*, it seems that this film was to mark a 'return to political cinema', in the spirit of *Pigsty* and *Teorema*.

It has often been said that any single work by Pasolini needs to be seen in terms of his work as a whole, and this has much to do with the fragmentary quality of many of his writings and films, his fondness for pastiche, the urgent notational haste that often stands in for something more polished and considered. The 'auteur' way of considering films is more or less compulsory in Pasolini's case, but probably less and less the way people think about movies being made today. Invented in the 50s by the founders of *Cahiers du cinéma*, the auteur theory had tremendous currency among my generation of filmgoers. Originally applied to Hollywood movies, most of them actually producer-driven, the 'theory'

proved that the director's unique artistic signature could be detected in all his products, however diluted by exigencies of collaboration. This made fairly legible sense in the case of a director like Hitchcock, though at its worst, the auteur theory was akin to celebrating the designer of a line of stoves or refrigerators. You might really adore the look of a 1958 Kelvinator freezer, but the point of its design was to sell as many units as possible, and any number of people had a say in how it was put together. The allure of the theory, though, was the exercise of finding 'the ghost in the machine', proper-naming the specific creative lubricant used to keep its gears meshing.

Films were, of course, usually directed by somebody, and some people knew about directors, and some directors were considered better than others by the people who hired them or had to work with them, but before the auteur theory very few of them had ever thought of themselves as 'artists'. An artist, after all, makes something entirely his own way, without consulting a client. The auteur theory did propagate authentic auteurs, namely the people who'd invented the theory and proceeded to make their own films (Godard, Truffaut, Rivette, Rohmer, et al.). In Europe, in any case, film production wasn't so alien to the notion of the artist-director, or the film as a work of art. The commercial stakes were nowhere as big as in Hollywood; a modest return on a low-budget movie wasn't a career-breaker, quite the contrary. Many Western European countries subsidised films to dilute the cultural impact of Hollywood. And even though much of Eastern bloc production was abysmal, a few first-rate directors emerged in systems that were state-sponsored and relatively free from commercial calculation.

The impact of auteurism on Hollywood in the late 60s was a bit like a lightning strike: powerful, and over within a flash. In the countercultural ambience of the 60s and early 70s, film students who'd absorbed the French New Wave, Italian neo-realism, Bergman, Kurosawa, Ozu, etc. – Coppola, Scorsese, Friedkin, De Palma – began breaking into Hollywood. The early successes of Robert Altman and others who had worked in the much cheaper and more improvisational medium of early television, the cultural youthquakes of *Bonnie and Clyde* and the low-budget *Easy Rider*,

ratified and empowered the idea of the artist-director. For part of the 70s, when Hollywood's home-grown auteurs at least occasionally scored commercial hits, the directing cult sustained a critical and popular following, and power seemed to migrate to the director from the producer and the studio. Concurrently, in America, 'foreign movies' enjoyed a substantial art house constituency. Every country had its handful of brand names the dedicated cineaste knew by heart, attached to 'bodies of work' that demanded high seriousness, the kind of critical scrutiny given to literature and music. The Italian branch consisted of Rossellini, De Sica, Fellini, Antonioni and Pasolini.

As Peter Biskind illustrates in his recent book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, the power shift from studio to director occurred mainly because the geriatric powers that still ran the studios had absolutely no handle on the audience of films like *Easy Rider*. The moguls controlled the money; they had seen that something shot for peanuts, in a completely idiosyncratic (and to them bewildering) way, could earn enormous profits. For a time, the studios bet the farm on such movies, and inevitably those kind of movies stopped earning, and eventually younger blood took over the studios and wrestled back control of the film-making process. Something else happened, too, in 1975, the year of *Salò: Jaws*.

Spielberg and the nexus of film-making connected to him are everything I dislike: the cinema of mechanical manipulation, replete with fake emotions, cheap sentiments, endless calculation, imperial ambition. *Jaws*, soon followed by the vapid *Star Wars*, then the faecal *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, sounded the death knell of Hollywood auteurism. (The *coup de grâce*, vide Biskind, came a few years later, with the gargantuan failure of Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*.) *Jaws* and its icky spawn returned American film-making to a purely industrial process: no more arty exercises in existentialism, no more Brechtian effects, no more obtrusive stylistic tics. The Spielbergian idea was to snuggle up to the money, and turn out the kind of movies the studios loved. The target audience of Spielberg and Lucas was the adolescent American male and his swarming testosterone. The ideal pitch was a 'high concept' running exactly one sentence. The subsequent history of Hollywood film has been

thin, vis-à-vis movies with legible signatures. It isn't that such films aren't ever made, but each one has the anomalous character of a lone pearl in a bed of toxic oysters⁷

The sea change didn't directly ruin the auteur concept in Europe; it was only one aspect of corporate consolidation that soon took over the world, part of the 'free market' thuggery of Reagan and Thatcher, which did influence the decline of film subsidies and the ability of independent producers to finance personal films. This is a crude sketch, and not intended to idealise the European industry, which in many ways, even in its glory decades, merely reproduced the pathologies of Hollywood on a more intimate scale. But I would guess that for many once-compulsive moviegoers like me, who were in their twenties in the 70s, *Salò* has the retrospective aura of 'the last art movie', or one of the last, from the high period of auteurism. These films and their directors again became marginal in their influence, and ever more marginal in their visibility.

The constellation of directors whose films coincided with the auteur period began dying out, or petering out. Pasolini's death signalled a waning of radical energies in European film, as did Fassbinder's seven years later, just after the making of *Querelle*. It wasn't simply that nothing radical replaced them; a quantum shift in the West's political climate, and a related change in audience tastes and expectations, made such energies irrelevant. It took several years and the spread of home video to wipe out the art houses, but the experience of film as a personal artistic medium began disappearing in a big way not long after *Salò* made its scattered appearances in the few theatres willing to screen it.

The auteur concept survives in a mannerist, democratic version. Thanks to ancillary marketing, almost anybody who directs films today becomes an instant auteur: screenplays automatically appear in book form, soundtracks are issued as CDs, a 'director's cut' of practically anything competes with its release cut in video stores. Independent cinema has been absorbed into consumer culture as a slightly funky 'taste' which, even though widely acknowledged as (usually) superior to mainstream products, is completely marginal to the consciousness industry. There is no American film-maker today, and perhaps no European one, whose political opinions



or thinking on social issues would be treated seriously in the press, as Godard's, Fassbinder's and Pasolini's once were, even if the film-maker himself has star visibility in the culture. Certainly, there is no film-maker with the cultural authority and intellectual reach to inspire political action; moreover, there is no political culture with significant ties to contemporary artistic culture. In America, the culture wars have been decisively won by the left, but politics have been captured by the right, and these two lobes of the collective brain have nothing to do with each other. The bath of movie exiguia for sale doesn't at all suggest a significant tendency in social thought, or in anything larger than itself; it advertises the fact that somebody's product emerged more or less intact from an intricate committee process, made some money, and provided a flicker of novelty in the continuing avalanche of canned entertainment.

The difference between a first-rate film by Mike Leigh, Todd Solondz, Jane Campion or Spike Lee, and the auteur films of the past, isn't found in the films themselves, but in the cultural situation they exist in. The consumer culture has come more and more to resemble, in psychic terms, the model of life Pasolini depicted in *Salò*, where a limitless choice

Pasolini's death signalled a waning of radical energies in European film

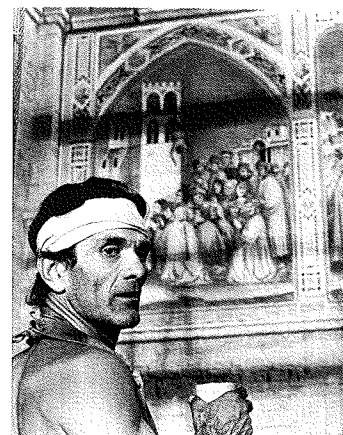
of gratifications disguises an absence of all choice and all resistance, where nothing can disrupt the smooth operation of a system that turns art into products and people into things.

10

In his last four movies, Pasolini abridged classical texts: Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the authorless/multi-authored *Arabian Nights* and Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*. Many of his earlier films were drawn from classic drama and literature – *Medea*, *Oedipus Rex*, the Matthew Gospel, the *Oresteia*. But the later sources are much more porous, epic narratives containing many smaller ones, unified by a surrounding device of a series of storytellers (in *Arabian Nights*, one storyteller) who occupy the frame instead of the picture. The act of narrative has some definite purpose: to fill the months when Boccaccio's collection of Florentine sybarites sit out the plague in rural exile; to 'beguile the long day' as Chaucer's pilgrims make their way to Canterbury; to postpone King Shahrayar's execution of Shahrazad; to arouse the libertines in the Château of Silling.



Narrative as aphrodisiac, or, listening with the penis



None of the texts is formless, but each generates a feeling of endlessness, of a narrative enclosure so large and variegated in content that its contours continually dissolve. They suggest the same open-ended habit of digression and lack of unity that characterise all but a few of Pasolini's films. The trilogy comprised of the first three films has the feeling of flotation across a sequence of loosely linked dreams, any two of which might logically precede or follow one another.

In *Arabian Nights* and *Decameron*, Pasolini dispenses with the external, unifying narrator, threading the former together by weaving one story, that of Nur-ed-Din and Zumurrud, between the others, while *Decameron* is 'contained' by the progress of a monastery fresco as it is painted by a pupil of Giotto (played by Pasolini). Pasolini retains the metanarrative device in *Canterbury Tales*, himself appearing as Chaucer. In



Pasolini as Giotto and as Chaucer

Salò, the courtesan-narrators dominate the structure of the film; their stories directly inspire the actions of the libertines, each episode being first cast as language, then as illustration.

The films in *The Trilogy of Life* proceed from texts that mark the beginning of vernacular languages. Each celebrates the vivid, bawdy, erotic life of the medieval world, the life of the barnyard, the caravanserai, the voyage of trade. The naked human body is really the star of these movies, a challenge to the hierarchy of film images that divides 'tasteful' nudity and eroticism from 'pornography', or from the more generous range of representations permitted in painting, sculpture and literature. Pasolini presents nakedness with a *faux-naïveté* endorsed by the canonical status of the trilogy's literary sources, a readymade defence against innumerable indecency charges brought against the films in Italy.

While making *Salò*, Pasolini wrote a repudiation of the trilogy, which prefaced the book in which their screenplays were collected, and later appeared as a posthumous final column for *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's leading daily newspaper. (The columns were later collected as *Lutheran Letters*.) In the repudiation, he says that

during the first phase of the cultural and anthropological crisis which began towards the end of the sixties – in which the unreality of the subculture of the mass media and therefore of mass communication began to reign supreme – the last bulwark of reality seemed to be 'innocent' bodies with the archaic, dark, vital violence of their sexual organs

However, 'all that has been turned upside down':

First: the progressive struggle for democratization of expression and for sexual liberation has been brutally superseded and cancelled out by the decision of the consumerist power to grant a tolerance as vast as it is false.

Secondly: even the 'reality' of innocent bodies has been violated, manipulated, enslaved by consumerist power – indeed such violence to human bodies has become the most macroscopic fact of the new human epoch.



Pasolini develops these ideas with great force, in a few pages, with somewhat strained logic: 'the degeneration of bodies and sex organs has assumed a retroactive character', he writes. In effect, the bodies of the present, used to portray bodies in the narrative past, corrupted as the 'present' bodies are by consumer society, 'means that they were already so potentially' – if I follow this correctly, the naked youths in the *actual* past, represented by naked actors in the present, were already 'degenerated', *if they could come to exemplify degeneracy in the future*. To quote Pasolini further:

if today they are human garbage it means that they were potentially the same *then*; so they were imbeciles forced to be adorable; solid criminals forced to be pathetic; useless, vile creatures forced to be innocent and saintly, etc. The collapse of the present implies the collapse of the past. Life is a heap of insignificant and ironical ruins

He couldn't continue making films like the trilogy, Pasolini claims, even if he wanted to, 'because now I hate the bodies and the sex organs'.⁸

Enslaved by consumer power

Patrick Rumble, in an important study of the trilogy, proposes that this recantation be viewed ironically, like Chaucer's deathbed retraction of *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's introduction to *The Decameron* – in effect, like familiar disclaimers historically designed to defuse ecclesiastical and other censure, either by preemptive penitence or the claim that the author has simply set down what he's heard from others. Even more pertinent support for this idea might be found in the psychiatric disclaimers that routinely prefaced pornographic literature of the 40s and 50s, purporting to recommend their contents as valuable, if sordid, case studies of nymphomania, bestiality and so forth, which Nabokov trenchantly parodied in the opening pages of *Lolita*. But it's difficult to see how Pasolini's repudiation could serve only this sly function: the trilogy had long been released by the time he wrote the repudiation in June 1975, and, by happenstance, it wasn't widely read until a few days after his murder in November.

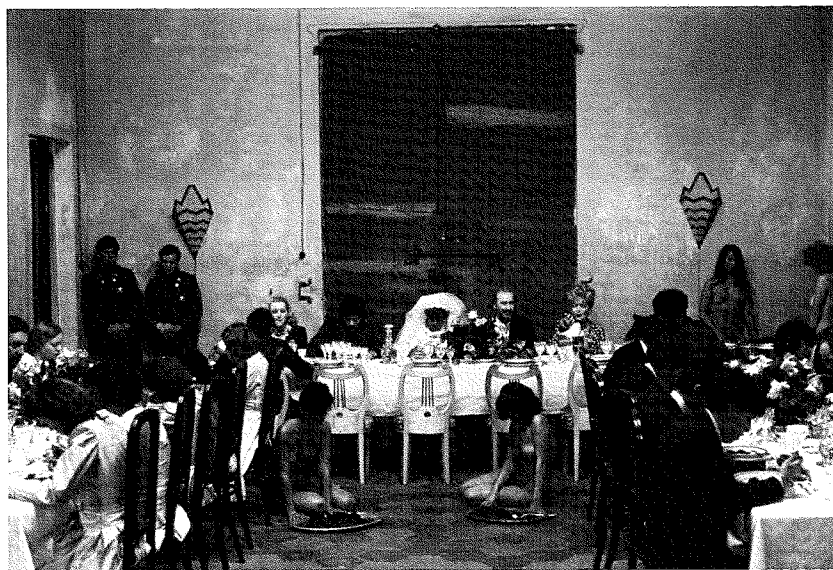
I think one needs to take the repudiation seriously. For one thing, the ideological volte-face has always been commonplace among Italian writers, film-makers and artists, for whom dialectics is itself an art form. Pasolini's text reads earnestly enough, and seems to illustrate, along with many of the *Lutheran Letters*, a deepening disgust and alienation. As far as the difference between medieval and modern bodies is concerned, this may well be an anthropological reality worth observing, though in the *Lutheran Letters* Pasolini habitually attributes cosmic political significance to trivial nuances in youth fashions, even denouncing long hair. One has to remember that Pasolini, like many men, gay and straight, continued to desire youths of exactly the same age while he himself got older; these youths, in Pasolini's case, were the 50s street punks from the Roman *borgate* in white chinos and duck's-ass haircuts. The fashion statements of Flower Power hardly add up to an anthropological holocaust, but it was very much in Pasolini's style to conflate his personal fetishism with all that was precious and dying out in the world. Pasolini's 'great love', the inexorable cherub Ninetto Davoli, a *borgate* type who affected the hippy look, had crushed the director by getting married: if all that devotion ended in nothing, perhaps it was nothing to begin with.⁹ If this sounds

reductive, I would suggest that many of the irritations expressed in the *Lutheran Letters* are 'inflative'. To paraphrase his biographer Enzo Siciliano, Pasolini needed his wounds to be healed in public and with the public.

What operates alongside Pasolini's genuine political dismay in the repudiation of the trilogy are much more personal and only faintly articulated disappointments. Among other things, the onset of middle age undoubtedly brought him to a direct, unwelcome awareness of himself as a 'john' for the youths he desired, a rich mark like all the others. If he had previously conceived an essential class solidarity with the boys he frequented, a solidarity 'proven' by his empathetic treatment of them in his poetry, novels and films, an identification fortified by a care for his body that had long resisted the effects of age, making him, like them, 'desirable', it's clear in some of the last photos of Pasolini, many of them nude studies, that he had acquired what Genet called 'the old body', the sag of gravity that marks the diminution of the body's career as an erotic object. Those for whom sex remains crucial after the age of attractiveness



Filming uncorrupted youth in *Arabian Nights*



has passed often keenly resent the objects of their desires, and I strongly suspect that this circumstance, as well as the ironical use of the disclaimer, accounts for the character of Pasolini's repudiation. *Salò* oscillates between contempt and fascination for the love object, as Pasolini acknowledged. It is a mid-life crisis written large enough to colonise the history of Italian fascism.

Unlike the amorphous trilogy, *Salò* has a rigid formal structure, as if extracted from Sade's novel the way a diamond is mined from coal. Within the rigid formality, there is quite a bit of slippage and choppiness. Pasolini was a hasty, hurried film-maker, and *Salò* is really more elegant than precise. Some interesting, useless parallels: Sade wrote *120 Days of Sodom* in 1785, at the age of forty-five, while imprisoned in the Bastille; composed in the reign of Louis XVI, just before the French Revolution, it takes place in the France of Louis XIV, its libertine protagonists grown wealthy during the Sun King's foreign wars. *Salò*, filmed in the Italy of Giovanni Leone and Aldo Moro, is set in the horrific time of Mussolini's short-lived Republic of Salò, in 1944, its libertines grown rich on fascism

A deepening disgust and alienation

and its culture of corruption and betrayal. Sade wrote his masterpiece on an easily hidden scroll of tissue-thin paper (to be lost for over a century after the storming of the Bastille), in thirty-seven days; Pasolini's film took thirty-seven days to film.

11

Salò's opening credits are Pasolini's usual plain, black-on-white title cards. Pasolini often runs evocative sound effects and music behind his titles; in *Salò*'s credit sequence the theme music indicates how we should view the movie that follows. The song is an instrumental version of 'These Foolish Things', a sentimental 40s standard that's been covered by everyone from Billie Holiday to Bryan Ferry. Even if one doesn't know the lyrics ('you came/you saw/you conquered me', etc.), the romantic flavour of the tune takes on a heavy freight of irony as *Salò* unfolds and the song recurs in little snatches on the soundtrack. 'These Foolish Things' has its kiss of bittersweet, but its mood is essentially 'upbeat', in a languid, post-coital way, a song of sophisticated love found, rather than hopeless love lost. Given the barbarity of the love we witness in the film, 'These Foolish Things' indexes a realm of things outside the movie (imagine it addressed to Pasolini's countless one-night lovers, his libido itself, or the trattorias, train stations and public lavatories of nocturnal courtship), and hints that *Salò* should be viewed as a comic deflation of the music's suave, Noël Coward-esque vision of erotic relations. What happens in *Salò* is unimaginable in the universe of 'These Foolish Things'. However, the song is the kind of cultural fragment that turns darkly comic, surreally incongruous inside the world of *Salò*, like the *faux*-Léger murals in the confiscated villa that substitutes for the Château of Silling, the voice of Ezra Pound on the radio, the libertines' late evening chatter about Baudelaire and Nietzsche. Not that any of these items are grossly incompatible with a fascist aesthetic (Pound, obviously, fits right in), but they point to things outside the film, 'hailing' the sensibilities of 1975 rather than 1944.

The credits feature a few familiar names: Sergio Citti (screenplay collaboration), Pasolini's 'living dictionary' of Roman slang during his early

career as a novelist, a close friend and writing partner, brother of Pasolini's frequent lead actor Franco Citti, and a journeyman director at the time – *Salò* was originally conceived as Citti's project, taken over by Pasolini after financing problems arose; Tonino Delli Colli, cinematographer on almost all Pasolini's movies; Alberto Grimaldi, the producer of Pasolini's last three films; art director Dante Ferretti; music supervisor Ennio Morricone; costume designer Danilo Donati; still photographer Deborah Beer. Since mostly non-actors were cast, the only professional names that might register with the viewer are those of Elsa De Giorgi, queen of the 'white telephone' dramas of the 30s, Caterina Boratto, another 30s actress, who also played Juliet's mother in *Juliet of the Spirits*, and Hélène Surgère, star of several Paul Vecchiali films of the 70s (*Femmes Femmes*, *Drugstore Romance*), all in the roles of courtesan-narrators. Sonia Saviange, the fourth courtesan, who plays piano accompaniment throughout the film, appeared with Surgère in *Femmes Femmes*, a scene from which is 'quoted' during *Salò*'s second wedding ceremony. Franco Merli and Ines Pellegrini, who played Nur-ed-Din and Zumurud in *Arabian Nights*, appear respectively as a male victim and a servant.

Although *Salò* is the ultimate chamber piece, not all of its figures emerge as 'characters'. On the contrary, none of them do. Apart from the libertines and courtesans, who get to exhibit a lot of behaviour and hence create a slight illusion of dimensionality, the actors typically have only a moment or two of individual screen time – a bit of dramatic business here, a close-up there; none has his or her own 'story', all are destined to the same fate; the victims, libertines' daughters, soldiers, 'fuckers' and servants are identified by the actors' real first names in the film, or not at all. As characters, they lack the amplitude that would merit the second naming of fiction.

After countless viewings of *Salò* I still can't distinguish some of the victims from others with similar faces or bodies. This is, probably, an intended effect of the film's 'controlled chaos', a reflection of the 'true anarchy' of fascism proclaimed by the libertines, epitomised in the beauty contest where only the asses of the contestants are considered. Everyone is reduced to numerical flesh; none of the flesh has a personality, only animal



expressiveness. Aside from a few special instances, the victims are denied the use of language, hence the ability to be seen as persons.

Salò's opening credits are always noted for one peculiar title card. Like the theme music, it often provoked laughter in the audiences at the old Pico theatre: a bibliography, listing essays on Sade by Roland Barthes, Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Klossowski, Maurice Blanchot and Philippe Sollers. How to interpret this defensive appeal to intellectual legitimacy? Of course, this body of writings, a standard canon of recuperative texts, is quite useful, even essential, in thinking about Sade, the implications of his atheism and his ideas about Nature, particularly in relation to Rousseau and the Enlightenment, and in thinking about *Salò*, which in some crucial respects transposes Sade's ideas into a meditation on the consumer society; the title card identifies this as a film for an elite audience, for people who will bring to it something more than 'prurient' interest. But we know, too, that Pasolini intended to shock people who certainly wouldn't bother reading Klossowski afterwards, and the ones who would wouldn't need a bibliography. The movie doesn't really need it, either: it's hard to imagine any but the most obdurate puritan or incurious viewer sitting

The body becomes an abstraction, a number equal to all other numbers



through *Salò* without apprehending that it's 'about' something beyond pornography. But *Salò* also *is* about pornography, and part of its interest is pornographic: pornography is the glue holding it together, despite the coy and important technical absence of explicitly pictured oral, anal or vaginal penetration. The bibliography seems like special pleading, an assertion that Pasolini is making pornography for completely different reasons than an ordinary pornographer. Some different reasons, yes. Completely different ones, no.

12

I left The Pico one night just behind two Italian women of a certain age, whom the manager had identified to me on the way in as a scriptwriting team who had worked in Hollywood in the 40s and were now, in their golden years, location scouts. As they exited through the lobby, one turned to the other and said, 'That's just like the Italians, they blame the fascists for everything.'

Pasolini's version of Italian fascism, like Bertolucci's, is a metaphor for its worst excesses. He grew up inside it, just as the boy in Rossellini's

Neorealism en route to fairy tale

Germany Year Zero grew up inside Nazism. And although Pasolini's brother was actually shot by communist partisans, the director's carefully honed legend transformed this death into a martyrdom by fascists. Without finding much to admire about Mussolini, it can be fairly said that ordinary life in Italy under fascism, at least until Italy entered the war on the German side, was infinitely less oppressive than ordinary life in Germany under Hitler. As Tag Gallagher, Rossellini's biographer, goes to vehement lengths to elucidate, Italy in the 20s had a more open press than the United States did, fairer labour laws and a more inclusive spectrum of political parties.

Given Pasolini's reasoning in his repudiation of *The Trilogy of Life*, we can assume that from his point of view, the fact that the last years of fascism produced atrocities and massive corruption meant that its ruinous outcome was foreordained. Bertolucci and Pasolini both use the slaughter of children as a metaphoric précis of 'what fascism was', with the difference that in *Salò* even the children are implicated in fascism's horrors – by their class, their lack of resistance, virtually by their ability to be slaughtered.

13

A set of titles prefaces the images: '1944–45 during the Nazi-Fascist Occupation', and 'ANTINFERNÒ'. A slow pan reveals the curve of a promontory along Lake Garda, the darkish water rippling, a faint breeze stirring palm fronds on the esplanade. A small sign identifies the town as SALÒ, then the image dissolves, to one of a different quayside, where a stone railing and street lamps run along a street with a long yellow building, a de Chirico kind of building, in an ambiguous style common in Italy, its stucco architecture vaguely administrative, but coloured like a resort hotel. Picture-postcard views, strangely static and silent.

We first see the libertines in a darkened room, with bright sunlight glazing in three arched windows, the central window frame reflected on a polished wooden table. In long shot, it's barely possible to make out the document that is passing from one set of hands to another, as it is signed by the libertines and finally rubbed with an old-fashioned blotting stamp.

The men address each other with the generic titles that serve as their names throughout the film: 'Excellency', 'Signore', 'Presidente'. Finally, we see the document in close-up: a soft-cover notebook, autumnal ochre, with a title in script that I can't make out in the video of *Salò* – perhaps it says 'Risorgimento', which would have a nice little irony.

The names used in this scene are the only ones they will have, though certain filmographies give them the names Sade gave them in *120 Days*: Blangis, Curval, Durcet and the Bishop of X***, which they will also be known as here. For Pasolini, as for Sade, they are 'four powerful, ontological and thus arbitrary men (a duke, a banker, a judge, and a monseignor)'.¹⁰ The decorous calm of this opening has a retroactive echo of the administrative horror of daily fascism, exemplified by the Wannsee Conference, but less sensationally by all the minor, incremental, bureaucratic nuances through which fascist power legitimised itself by adjustments of existing laws. Enzensberger has illustrated the surreal quality of fascist justice by citing, alongside restrictions on the use of public space by Jews, elaborate Nazi statutes regulating the humane killing of shellfish.¹¹ (Many of the indecency statutes used to prosecute Pasolini's



Blangis



films were remnants of the Mussolini era.) In Sade, the libertines' laws exist strictly to enhance lubricity; its actual subjects have no rights within it, only prohibitions. Any rule can be ignored or amended to suit the whims of the four masters. The point of the law is to overthrow the ordinary idea of law, to arbitrarily regulate the inhuman.

The film cuts to the round-up of male victims, in a series of episodes that contrast the calmly chilly beauty of the April countryside with the grim, implacable force of military authority – scenes that Pasolini must have witnessed many times in his childhood. The boys who will serve as armed guards and 'fuckers' are plucked one by one from barely populated villages. The macabre procession contains a slight ambiguity, for the authorities are trawling not simply for able-bodied men but, as it turns out later, for exceptionally well-endowed sexual objects.

Three boys on bikes are ambushed by men in trenchcoats. When we first see the organiser of the ambush, he stands beside his gleaming black sedan, one fist on his hip, in an almost mincing pose. He is handsome in a bleary way, unremarkable, bemused. Once the boys are cornered he points a pistol at the chosen one (ruddy-faced, a trifle slow-witted) and smiles

The round-up



contemptuously: 'Where are you going?' The boy's docile shrug isn't quite what the scene calls for. The visual language of this exchange belongs to a different narrative. The hand on the hip, the softly thrown-out question, the smile, the quizzical expression of the boy all refer elsewhere to the meeting of a youngish pederast and a sexually malleable teenager.

The round-up episodes in *Salò* can be described as 'indifferently eroticised'. The first boys are collected by people who will not get to use them. They're marched off with a military efficiency, for an as-yet unknown purpose. The wide lens used in these scenes exaggerates spatial curves and partial circles in the landscape – riverbanks, paving stones, etc. The horizon is bent into an ellipsis that creates a feeling of enclosure and entrapment. (A highly linear scheme of Renaissance perspectives, later in the film, enhances the theatricality of the orgies and recitations.) Pasolini establishes the desolation of villages emptied of young people, an atmosphere of desuetude in the countryside. The micro-army that attends the libertines and harvests boys from forlorn agricultural settlements also has a thinned-out look, almost a miniature effect, evoking what we already know from the sequence's titles: the war is winding down, these soldier-

Auditioning for martyrdom

gangsters are retreating to their final stand at Salò. What we're seeing is their parting exercise of absolute power over the citizenry. The co-operation of the victims is not surprising; they've grown up inside fascism, like fish in water. It was only after Il Duce was hanged from a lamppost that many Italians understood that they had been sleepwalking in a grand deception.

Next, in a village square where numerous peasants huddle together looking on, two soldiers march past a corpse lying face down, another boy between them, to a convoy truck framed from a low angle against a cloud-spattered, greenish-blue sky. The truck is monumentalised, as in a frame from Eisenstein. The dissonant style of the shot typifies what Pasolini self-consciously refers to as the 'contamination' of his method, namely pastiche, importing other styles into his montage. This happens again in the subsequent scene, in another village, where 'Claudio' is led away along a *cascina* – the multifunctional type of single building typical of northern Italian farming villages – as his mother runs after him with a scarf; as she drapes it around his neck, he turns his head and tells her to go away. The scene is a reprise (without the shooting) of Anna Magnani's death scene in *Rome Open City*. (In my embedded, false memory of this scene, Claudio spits in his mother's face; Claudio does do a lot of spitting in *Salò*, and becomes one of the most happily vicious guards. The actor's close resemblance to Ninetto Davoli has been remarked on by Pasolini's biographers.)¹²

'Ezio', in pullover and sports jacket, goes grimly off with the soldiers. A small boy hops off a swing in an open barn to watch him go and says goodbye. 'Ciao, Luigi,' Ezio says, glancing over his shoulder. *Salò* being threadbare on character development, I usually fix on this small human moment as premonitory of Ezio's later moments of 'difference' – of the guards, he alone carries out the libertines' brutal orders without enthusiasm, eventually becoming a victim himself. The vague gesture, and others like it, towards the individuation of characters is the kind of queer grace note Pasolini might include in the category of 'contamination', like the mixing of professional actors and amateurs, in this instance a sort of 'hailing' in the direction of a different kind of narrativity. Hailing is as far

as it goes: the subjective life of anybody in *Salò* is *terra incognita*. In fact, the film doesn't encourage us to imagine its personae in any alternative scenarios, or to invest them with anything like empathy. It's much more characteristic, especially in *Salò*, for the situations Pasolini dramatises to be 'contaminated' by weirdly inappropriate expressions on faces caught in close-up, and by inexplicable displays of passivity and complicity during scenes of the film's worst horrors, as if some of the actors had been given no direction, or been told they were out of frame. While the dialogues in *Salò* were much less improvisational than in previous Pasolini films, the comportment of bodies and faces in various sequences suggests a deliberate slackness in orchestrating overpopulated frames. (Judging by the spare anecdotal information we have on the shooting of the film, the actors were never particularly caught up in the extremity of what they were depicting; they found it hilarious that the 'excrement' was crafted from the finest Swiss chocolate and orange marmalade.)

The selection of guards and 'fuckers' is followed by a group 'marriage' of the libertines to each other's daughters. The pairing off of daughters with their fathers' cronies was unexceptional in Sade's time, and



Renaissance perspective



in the novel, in fact, these marriages are effected to provide a masquerade of 'respectability' for the ménage at the Château. Here they're more overtly sinister. The four women wear vintage dresses and hats in the high style of 40s fascist Italy; they look slightly whorish. We see them waiting in an elegant parlour in what may be the same villa in the opening shot, or a different one; the newly conscripted guards, now in uniform, burst in; Claudio struts up to one of them, spits in her face; she slaps him; the guards rush all four women and drag them into the hall. Ezio is apologetic: 'We've been ordered to do this,' he explains.

Once in their fathers' presence the women become immobile, like cattle. Blangis announces the order of pairing, with the cryptic air of calm satisfaction that this libertine exhibits throughout, broken occasionally, and terrifyingly, by outbursts of calculated rage. Although Pasolini redundantly travesties the conventional wedding ceremony twice in *Salò*, the 'marriages' in this scene aren't commemorated by any ritual or even formalised by a performative verbal act. Blangis simply says that X will marry Y, A will marry Z, etc. Two of these daughters are his own – the Bishop, of course, would not have a legally acknowledged one to throw

and its effect of psychological miniaturisation

into the pool. Blangis goes on to quote some lines from Proust's *Within a Budding Grove*, adding that 'the bourgeoisie has never hesitated to kill its own children'.

This sequence is held together by nothing very coherent, but rather by an energised festering of nascent codes. We're pulled into complicity with *Salò* by the fastidious, almost dainty detachment and implacability of the libertines' will, and the extremely sexualised beauty of their victims and accomplices, their 'anonymous movie star' aura, so closely resembling that of conventional porn. This erotic appeal, everywhere compromising because of the film's relentless cruelty, carries us past *Salò*'s narrative gaps and inconsistencies, in much the same way that porn's depiction of genitals and penetration makes its perfunctorily 'socially redeeming' narrative garnish superfluous.

Salò's ritualised libidinal structures, its 'routine of seduction', like that of *Teorema*, blurs a plethora of confusions. For instance, it is never clear which of these daughters is which, or whose. Sade gives us elaborate introductory descriptions of his novel's main characters, and shorter ones to differentiate the storytellers, the harem of little girls, the eight 'fuckers', and so forth. His portraits, admittedly, aren't 'psychological' in any contemporary sense, but merely describe physical attributes and sexual or criminal histories. It would require an effort completely unmerited by the text to keep anyone's identity in mind while he or she is described eating shit, or having 'the hairs on his ass plucked out one by one'. Similarly, if we distinguish Pasolini's characters at all, beyond the categories they inhabit – libertine, courtesan, victim, accomplice – it's in the same way we might learn to pick out individual hogs in a pigpen. The libertines 'marry' their daughters, but while these women are present, the camera doesn't individuate them, none gets a close-up as her name is spoken; they remain throughout a kind of muzzy gender unit, older than the teenage victims, younger than the courtesans, usually naked, cowering in a group.

Sade tells us that each libertine has long enjoyed sexual relations with his own daughter, and expects to continue doing so after her 'marriage' to one of his colleagues. At the end of the night in the Château of Silling, the libertines bed down with their respective 'wives', who quite

(opposite) Conjugal relations

eerily carry on certain ordinary domestic functions when not enduring fantastic kinds of abuse. But where Sade scored incest high on the stiffy-meter, it's not a particularly featured crime in *Salò*. These quasi-incestuous marriages don't figure at all in the mechanics of transgression, though it counts for something, I suppose, that the libertines eventually have their offspring raped and murdered by other people. These 'wives', in *Salò*, are relegated to the role of servants, while their fathers share their beds with their male 'fuckers'.

Along with incest, most of the baroque and complicated violations described in *120 Days* have been eschewed by Pasolini in favour of such 'milder' Sadean practices as coprophagia, 'golden showers', flagellation and anal intercourse. In relation to Sade, *Salò* is metonymic, but Pasolini's specific agenda of 'perversions' also comments on the sexual landscape of the 70s. Some gay writers have referred to the mid-70s as 'the golden age of promiscuity', and it was, if not golden, a period when anything short of murder between consenting adults, in some circles, might be experimented with. This was nothing humanly new in itself, but the public



visibility of 'extreme sexuality' was an aspect of the 70s emphasis on 'lifestyle' as a fashion choice. Sadoomasochism and its affectation had become chic, and its intricately coded iconography was making its way into advertising and Hollywood movies, as yet another vector of commerce. *Salò* is a fusion of 1785, 1944 and 1975: as Pasolini noted several times after wrapping the film, the executions in *Salò* employ the four legal methods of capital punishment allowed in Europe at the time.

After the marriages, selections proceed for the harems and 'fuckers'. The libertines go into the countryside as a kind of caravan, their midnight-blue sedans followed by army trucks and uniformed soldiers. They have the full resources of the state at their disposal, though this state apparatus is clearly in decay. The countryside is full of partisans. Things will collapse soon. We know this because we know it about 1944–5, of course, but we infer it, too, from the film's depopulated villages, the scattered gunfire and drone of unseen Flying Fortresses on the soundtrack. However, *Salò* quickly dispenses with its initial associations with neo-realist depictions of the German occupation and moves into the realm of a double narrative, wherein the meditation on fascism doubles as a documentary on homosexual cruising. The guards have been rounded up by the libertines' surrogates; the distribution of daughters is a formal, rather than libidinal, sealing of their pact. Now we're shown their desires directly at work, in the choosing of ideal bodies to dominate.

Sade tells us that a virtual army of pimps and procurers scoured France for the best-looking, biggest-hung, highest-born prey, who were kidnapped and sequestered in various houses and suburban châteaux. Here, much less exposition is used. We find out where a few of the victims come from: one is the son of an assizes judge, another's been abducted from a convent school. Presumably, they're all children of the middle class; they appear well groomed and expensively dressed, turned out for inspection like children in private schools. The baroque villas where they're impounded have an antiquated, peeling, mildewed deliquescence, with massive ghostly rooms, like the skeletal remains of vanquished grandeur.

Certain male accomplices appear in these scenes and nowhere else: gentlemen dressed in long coats and fedoras, like the libertines. These

figures aren't 'described' by the action, they haze the background of shots, existing only to reinforce an impression of ample collaboration in the libertines's project. The events in the château will take place out of the world's eyes, but the presence of these ancillary figures implies that nothing that happens later is truly furtive or hidden. The libertines talk openly of 'deflowering' the boys, prompting laughter by all, and it's here that *Salò* fully enters the realm of the fairy tale and exits the social logic informing most of the earlier scenes.

We are dealing with a criminal gang that at the same time represents the principal institutions of state power: the judiciary, banking, the aristocracy and the clergy. In effect, nightmare versions of any modern state's administrative structure. Dennis Mack Smith notes that in 1944:

The fascist tradition of semi-autonomous hooligans was reasserting itself to exploit and perhaps compensate for the continued feebleness of the central administration. A dozen squads were operating in Milan, some of them in receipt of government funds, some composed of criminals running various kinds of protection racket, some with their own private prisons and torture chambers ... The notorious gang run by Dr Pietro Koch, for example,



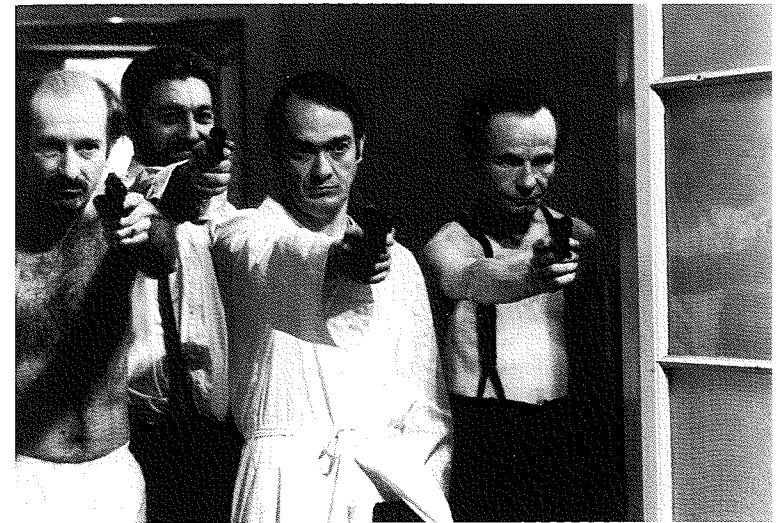
The stasis of fascist living

was set up with Mussolini's permission and paid and armed by the minister of the interior. Koch's headquarters was found to contain a number of prisoners and a variety of torture instruments; his organisation turned out to be involved in hard drug traffic and had become immensely rich.¹³

In a movie by Rossellini, the demoralisation of the society would be tracked through a network of ordinary lives. People went to work under fascism, pursued professions, frequented nightclubs, carried on love affairs. For Pasolini, fascist life takes place in a bell jar. We're shown a magnificent baroque villa, in that somehow dreamlike yet blunt, frontal way that Pasolini so often pictures churches and houses; then, in a shot masked by a square black frame, the libertines march across a large formal lawn, decorated by a large, dead fountain, in hard daylight.

An overhead view of a wide oval hall, cropped in half to create yet another visual arch or ellipse, with pale yellow walls and massive Federal-style moulding, where perhaps thirty youths are barked into three lines by a shouting headmaster. In another shot the libertines enter with their entourage, one of whom carries a glass ballot box.

'In choosing my actors I made my usual "contamination"', Pasolini told an interviewer.¹⁴ The practical consequence of this contamination is that Blangis, the only libertine played by a professional actor (Paolo Bonacelli), is the only one who brings genuine subtlety to his performance; the others have marvellously expressive faces and very mixed physicality, but mostly growl and grimace their way through the film. Physiognomy defines their character. There's the scrawny, dessicated, saturnine Durcet (Aldo Valletti), whose feline expressions and absurd exhibitionism project a deceptive lack of menace. The Bishop (Giorgio Cataldi), an almost handsome type, could easily be a Fiat salesman. Curval (Umberto Quintavalle) is a thin, vicious-looking party with a cunt-like dimple in his chin and a squarish moustache, a sour bureaucratic presence, with a passing resemblance to Eichmann. All neither exactly ordinary, nor in any sense extraordinary, while the thickly bearded, sensuous-lipped and disconcertingly genial Blangis carries a much more acutely nuanced air of perversity, of relishing his own evil. Blangis projects a poisonous



seductiveness; the others are merely repulsive, though Pasolini decided not to make them physically grotesque, as Sade's characters are.

The libertines 'cruise' the first collection of boys. They single out Franco and Sergio, the former dark and Mediterranean, the other a blond Northerner, both adorable. The boys' reactions to their future owners' scrutiny are curious. *Salò* repeatedly raises questions about how much these victims actually understand about what is happening to them and their ability to anticipate whatever will happen next. They seem at times to apprehend everything as a confusing adult game, one that becomes progressively more menacing and unpleasant. In this case the boys register fear, but fear mixed with ... its opposite. Both apprehension and a hint of innocent longing for the approval of their future torturers. While a frog-faced procurer chortles out the story of how he captured Franco in a sack, the suggestion of a smile trembles on the boy's lips; the story makes everyone laugh, including Sergio, who laughs 'vivaciously', with an attempt at a 'worldly' smile that catches Blangis's attention.

'Shouldn't we examine them more closely?' the Bishop asks Blangis, who tells the boys to undress. Sergio and Franco unbutton their long coats,

A criminal gang with the state's monopoly on violence



open their suit jackets, hoist their shirts and undershirts above their nipples; then they lower their pants and underpants to their calves. The camera does a slow pan down their muscular torsos, stopping to gaze at their uncircumcised penises. The camera slowly returns to their faces. The boys display no emotion, but one can read a vague anxiety about the effect made by their private parts: big enough? Desirable enough? Blangis and Durcet mark their names on slips of paper and drop them in the ballot box.

The procession moves on to another building on the grounds, colonnaded, possibly a revamped monastery or convent, but with a modern annex, something like an enclosed patio, where yet more young boys await inspection. The procurer-headmaster from the previous scene regales the libertines with anecdotes about his efforts to catch the boys, while reeling off their names; the camera frames each one in a medium close-up: 'Lamberto Gobbi', 'Carlo Porro', 'Umberto Chessari', 'Tonino Ferruca' – from a family of subversives ('Ah, bene,' says one of the libertines), 'Tonino Orlando'. Again we encounter the 'contamination', or

(above) Homicidal boarding school: masturbating the dummy; (opposite) The question of what any of these young people may think is in store for them is never explored

promiscuity, of Pasolini's method, in the vivid physicality of his characters. He collects 'types', where Fellini collected freaks: the procurer, with his heavy body, his throaty chuckle, his vague resemblance to a bullfrog, someone who might in real life be a pork butcher, or the proprietor of a café; and the boys, with their exquisitely individual faces, and the richly expressive inappropriateness of certain expressions they wear. True, the subversive Ferruca smoulders with a kind of defiance, and the fragile, elongated face of Tonino Orlando is moist around the eyes from crying. But Carlo Porro, curly-haired, handsome and saturnine, laughs – a somehow lubricious and mocking laugh, like the class clown jeering at the teacher, in this case privately deriding the pomp and sternness of the libertines. Umberto Chessari's sleepy half-shut eyes and suggestively parted lips give him the unmistakable look of indifferent availability, and his physical beauty, several notches above that of the others, in this context resonates as that of a much-in-demand street hustler. With this deliberately mixed morphology, any straightforward reading of this scene



is undermined. The boy-harem selections have a gelid solemnity, but their sense of threat is frequently undermined by visual cues that resist the overall trope of the narrative. (The arresting gorgeousness of most of these youths unavoidably invokes Pasolini's own well-publicised sexual tastes, and our awareness that *Salò* is a vehicle for indulging them totally. Chessari's close-up was another dependable moment of howling at those Pico screenings.)

Again, we aren't given the sense that these adolescents have been torn away from any potentially compelling a priori circumstances (though a few such are alluded to); we aren't led to speculate about what their lives were before this moment. The opening section of *Salò* is as close to naturalism as the film ever goes, yet even here we are half inside a darkening fairy tale. If the libertines will soon use these boys' bodies as experimental objects, indifferent to their pain and terror, it's also the case that as far as the film is concerned, they already are objects, creatures of a social world that has moulded them into generic 'types'.

The girl harems are selected at another villa, somewhat gloomier than the others, where the future victims huddle in dusky, bare rooms, and are brought one at a time into a run-down, high-ceilinged parlour. The place's seediness makes a more lucid picture of the shabby conditions of things in this end-of-the-war world. The girls, pictured in close panning shots and static groupings, appear extremely miserable. Here, one victim cries out for help and is ignored (this same little girl will be slaughtered early on, for trying to jump out of a window), while the others simply crouch in the gloom, looking unhappy but not discernibly anxious.

The question of what any of these young people may think is in store for them is never explored in *Salò*, any more than are their subjective states later on. One of this film's jarring aspects, as I've already indicated, is its utter absence of characters, of personalities. Pasolini quite correctly said that if he had generated sympathy for the victims with a lot of weeping and pathos, the film would have been unbearable, but there were diverse possibilities of, if not 'humanising' the characters, at least investing them with enough monadic information that we could accept the idea that *Salò*'s violations happen to human entities rather

than symbolic figures, bodies emptied of souls and emptied of brains as well. Even though this is, in the end, the effect of the Sadean discourse, and for latter-day intellectuals its point as well, it is utterly rebarbative in a film's simulation of ontological reality. It is not the lack of 'identification' that's disturbing, but the film's lack of anchorage in any quotidian reality beyond its art direction and costuming, a quality similar to the unrootedness of Sade's pornography, which bears a strong resemblance to science fiction.

Pasolini's libertines are as contemptuous of the female body as Sade's are. A horror of the vagina is expressed throughout *Salò*, and in the scenes of simulated intercourse involving women, they are always penetrated from behind, presumably anally. At the same time, the film is full of openings and entrances and other architectural details, objects and juxtapositions that invoke the vagina as a prevalent if not presiding motif. And the libertines only achieve arousal through the verbal ministrations of females, their presence, their submission, their condition as household chattel, despite their stated preference to bugger little boys and be fucked by enormously endowed studs. Moreover, these men never seem to particularly enjoy any of the sexual acts they engage in, with either sex; instead of the raucous and frenzied sexual acrobatics we find in Sade, these men exhibit a much more dour and grimly dutiful reaction to their own orgiastic agenda, as if monotonously running through a checklist of obligatory outrages. Cruelty is the only thing that really makes them smile, the knowledge of their absolute power over these 'miserable creatures' having usurped the capacity for sexual pleasure. Ideologically irreproachable, but a missed opportunity to make *Salò* more a movie, less a pedantic cartoon.

Eva, whose duenna partly undresses her and points out 'a delicious little ass', is curtly approved and dismissed with an impatient wave from Curval. Signora Castelli's candidate, Albertina, 'the daughter of a professor from Bologna', grins gamely as she's told to strip, but her smile reveals an imperfection, a blackened tooth that Blangis notices with a look of smouldering anger. Only when a third candidate, later identified as Renata, is escorted in, naked and weeping uncontrollably for 'her fool

mother' who drowned trying to save her, do the libertines turn avid, aroused by the girl's torment. They lean forward to gape at her. This darkly funny moment, like the shot of Franco's and Sergio's genitals, takes us slightly outside the trope of dark and hideous events, 'over the top' into that odd place where the artist winks at the audience from behind the camera, as if to assure us that we're watching a comedy masquerading as Theatre of Cruelty.

The efficient yet confusing metonymy of the round-up winds to its end. A certain expectation of cinematic logic is indefinitely thwarted by Pasolini's hermeticism. His shots provide us with a sampler of private references, like the lines of a poem, linked by a rather flimsy narrative thread. Now the caravan of army trucks, the black sedans, the sadists and their prey cross a bridge into Marzabotto, a town where all the inhabitants were slaughtered during the war (the scene was shot in a substitute town). Tonna Ferruca, his wiry hair haloed by sunlight through a rip in the truck's canvas covering, scrambles past the other captives, jumps into the road, leaps over the bridge's railing to the parched riverbank below, and runs a few hundred yards before he's mowed down by machine guns. Inside a sedan, the repulsive Durcet notes that 'now the boys are only eight,' and tells an inane joke about the number eight. The other libertines laugh uproariously. Here we see graphically how the death of others merely adds to their pleasure – hardly a major surprise, but it gives Pasolini the opportunity to re-enact, for the first of two times in the film, the heroic, anti-fascist version of his brother Guido's murder.

Arrival at the villa. The courtesans greet the libertines at the bottom of palatial entrance stairs. 'Everything is as you ordered.' How Signora Castelli, from the previous scene, has managed to arrive there so much ahead of them is not a question we're likely to ask, because the film is at last narrowing to its promised horror. From the outside, the villa is an extremely ugly, grandiose edifice, the Italian version of the Federal style, its stairs and columns dwarfing the victims and guards who assemble on the front lawn, directly below a Mussolinian balcony from which the libertines pronounce the rules of what will follow, as the courtesans, heavily made-up, swan around them. Punctually at six, everyone will meet



in the 'Orgy Room', where the courtesans will discourse on a chosen subject. The libertines may interrupt at will; 'any lewdness will be allowed'. The Sadean mania for regulation, with its piquant incongruities, is evidenced less in the decree that 'any man found having sex with a woman will be punished with the loss of a limb', than in the guarantee that 'the Salon and other rooms will be adequately heated'.

As we'll see, the orgies anticipated by the literal enunciation of the laws bear little resemblance to the highly ritualised and necrotic choreography that follows. The victims do not, in fact, 'following the example of animals', 'change position, intermingling, intertwining and copulating incestuously, committing adultery and sodomy', at least not with the abandon this implies. Moreover, the opportunities for incest and adultery are limited to copulation between the libertines and their daughter-brides, and this is never shown or suggested. The only instance in which a man is discovered having sex with a woman (foreshadowed in this scene by an exchange of glances between the soldier Ezio and the black servant played by Ines Pellegrini) results in the man's execution, but not the loss of a limb. Inconsistency is a deliberate constant in *Salò*.

'The Salon and other rooms will be adequately heated'

14

'The enclosure of the Sadian site', Roland Barthes wrote:

has another function: it forms the basis of a social autarchy. Once shut in, the libertines, their assistants, and their subjects form a total society, endowed with an economy, a morality, a language, and a time articulated into schedules, labors, and celebrations. Here, as elsewhere, the enclosure permits the system, i.e., the imagination.¹⁵

Contrary to Sade's mathematical divisions of time and events, as Pasolini observed in an interview: 'At first I wanted to show three of the 120 days, but ... it all flows together, and there are no clear divisions into days.'¹⁶ There is a degree of narrative seepage from one 'circle' to the next – from the circle of manias to the circle of shit to the circle of blood (though this seepage does happen, albeit differently, in Sade as well); events move forward in rough sync with their designated category, just as the crimes carried out only approximate those prescribed in the book of regulations; an explicit picturing of Sade's novel, or a part of it, would look like science fiction; and would probably require similar special effects.

The metonymy of *Salò* eliminates a great deal of what makes *The 120 Days* the fantastic tale that it is. Sade enumerates sexual acts that are physically impossible, gives his protagonists organs that would properly belong to mules, and depicts tortures from which the victims miraculously recover in order to be tortured again. *Salò* condenses this mayhem to credible proportions, rendering Sade's decadent Salon as a sort of homicidal boarding school.

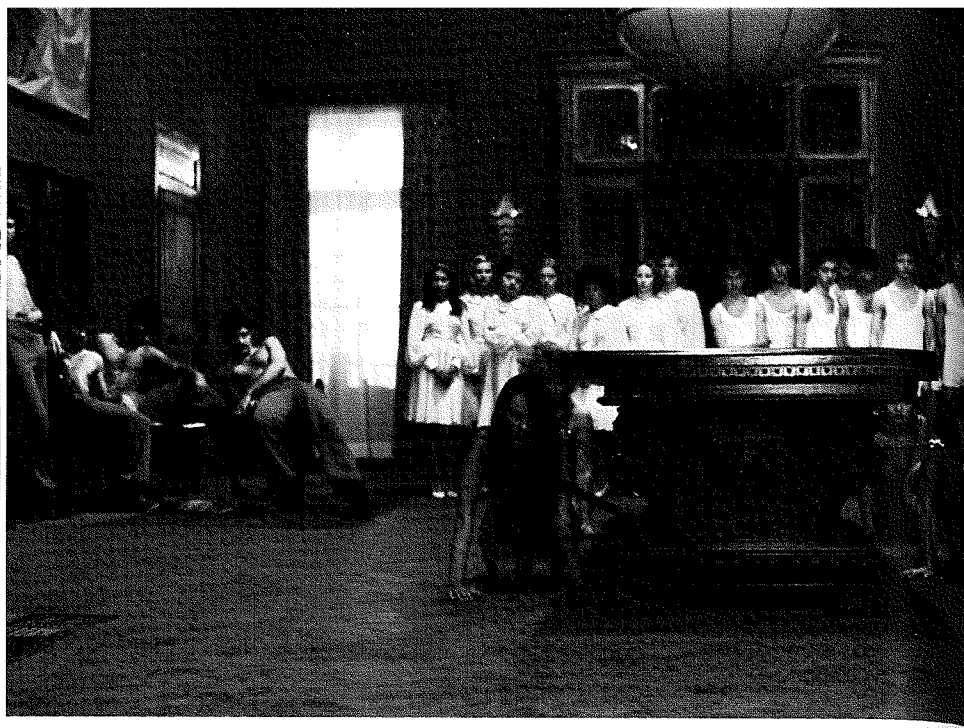
The film's point of view is problematised from the outset. The only protagonists with whom we might 'identify' are monstrosities, and the only 'look' that approximates that of the viewer is the occasional, inexpressive gaze of a child-victim caught in unexpected close-up. While the victims are utterly expendable, the outrages perpetrated on them are pedagogical. They will 'learn' abjection from their captors, who initiate them into the process of their own annihilation. However, it is also implied that ordinary fascism has already trained them in passivity and infantile obedience to



authority. We view the film while imagining the victims' state of mind, at the same time we are denied access to it. We see that the libertines will do nothing that corresponds to any normative code of behaviour; that everything will end in massacre; that the narrative is a self-consuming artifact that begins at zero and ends at zero. We anticipate its cruelties, in a sense look forward to them, as to the satisfactory completion of a necessary rite. *Salò* engages voyeurism rather than empathy, and attempts to turn voyeurism back on itself with various distancing devices.

After the ritual of the forthcoming days is established, the film becomes a cycle of routines, performed nightly in the same proscenium. Signora Vaccari, in her private suite, consults her oval make-up mirror and adjusts her diaphanous off-the-shoulder dress. This garment, a gauzy and obtrusive double triangle of piled chiffon decorated with big flower-like appliques of black acetate that stick out from it like poison quills, acquires its own visual personality over several scenes in which Vaccari moves about the Orgy Room in highly stylised, balletic swoops and swanning gestures. She tosses on a cape-like black boa, studies herself in the oval

The only 'look' that approximates the viewer's is the occasional gaze of a victim in close-up



mirror on the wardrobe door (which, as it swings shut, reflects the other mirror), and then descends to the Orgy Room. The bright, bluish light of the staircase, reflected on the glistening surface of a long table in the centre of the hall arranged parallel to the left and right walls, echoes the design of the film's opening shot; the long shot used each time a courtesan descends at story hour renders the staircase as a kind of vaginal chute that delivers the grotesque. The Orgy Room's architecture, its burnished colours, geometric Art Deco sconces, globe chandeliers, 'conversation areas', symmetrical doors leading off to unknown parts of the villa, becomes an imprint, eventually so familiar that the shifting groups of bodies contained in it are shuffled like figments in a dream, their mutations scarcely perceived by the viewer. The long shots that predominate in these scenes produce frustration, a kind of 'anti-porno' fuzziness around the sexual acts – gropings, rubbings, etc. – that transpire during the narrations. The standard perspectival framing of the hall has a miniaturising effect on the people inside it.

On this first occasion the victims are clothed, in light-blue outfits

The Orgy Room

resembling school uniforms. Some sit at the feet of the libertines, others on chairs at either side of them, flanked by the fuckers, whose enormous members are usually obvious from the way their pants are photographed. The guards are also present, and the 'wives', at the periphery of the action. Vaccari's stories recount her precocious corruption in childhood. She commences with the story of a teacher who taught her to masturbate him. Although Curval interrupts to fault Vaccari's first story for its lack of specific details, none of the courtesans' subsequent tales is any more closely descriptive than the first: they all suggest more or less arbitrary bits snipped out of the relevant sections in *Sade*, in keeping with the metonymic inclination of the movie. The punctum, in each case, is the sexual act at the heart of the story and its assumed effect on the audience within the film as well as the audience beyond the frame.

I must mention again an important difference between *Sade* and Pasolini: the prodigious excitements aroused by the (exhaustingly long-winded) stories in *The 120 Days* are given an almost pleasureless cast in *Salò*. The libertines experience arousal almost exclusively as a species of rage – and, curiously, at other times as an incitement to peculiarly coquettish ways of acting out. There is, of course, nothing tender or romantic in *Sade*; but there is, in everything, selfish pleasure. Pasolini's heroes appear to experience their own depravity as an unassuageable irritant, no less than their victims' experience of submission. This has to do with the stiff way that the actors have been directed, the stifling lack of exuberance in their 'evil'. But it owes something too to Pasolini's determination to implicate the viewer in this 'evil' while denying us the guilty pleasure of viewing it head-on.

Signora Vaccari describes her initiation into the whore's art, at an age slightly younger than that of the libertines' child-victims. After she learns how to masturbate, another client has her urinate in his mouth; another recoils in horror at the sight of her vagina, and wraps her in a sheet, leaving only her anus exposed. Still another incinerates her clothes and masturbates over the charred fabric. The narrations, spaced out over several days, are accompanied, first of all, by the pianist-courtesan, whose principal theme is Glinka's melancholy *Nocturne in F minor*, 'La

Séparation', interspersed with variations on 'These Foolish Things', some Chopin, and so on, all played to great effect, mostly moderato cantabile with occasional bursts of confident loudness; secondly, by casual frottage and other mild violations in the 'conversation areas': Curval grabs a boy's hand and places it on his crotch, etc. The narratives are also interrupted by libertines leaving the hall, dragging victims into an adjacent lavatory; other special events are staged elsewhere in the villa; during Signora Vaccari's first tale, another interruption is provided by one of the youngest girls, who runs the length of the hall and attempts to jump out of a window.

The pianist's role in *Salò* is curious. As Pasolini noted of the actresses cast as courtesans, they are all beautiful, but not young; Sonia Saviange, moreover, has an extremely flexible physiognomy that makes her look like a dour, weathered hag in one shot, a prim middle-aged matron in another, and an alluring woman of the world in another. As noted earlier, she speaks only once in the film, and that speech is a quotation from another film; as the musician, she is more readily assimilated into the household staff than the more glamorous clique of courtesans. Even her costumes are more conservative and inexpressive, more suggestive of the



Courtesan Vaccari

female wage earner than the flamboyant whore. A running motif in *Salò* consists of abrupt pauses in the piano background, sometimes followed by a shot of Saviange turning away from her keyboard to stare wordlessly at some especially nasty event behind her. Like so much else, this device is 'contaminated' by the fact that not everything the pianist reacts to in this way is extreme or objectionable. At the same time, the pianist is the only figure whose interiority becomes a matter of absorbing speculation, as we see again and again in her glances a suppressed compassion for the victims. Alone among the courtesans, her history isn't articulated; we know absolutely nothing about her, or why she was chosen to fulfil her strange role.

Vaccari's debut evening is followed by a breakfast scene, in a big, drafty-looking banquet room where the seating, at three long tables arranged like three sides of a rectangle, recalls the wedding banquet at the beginning of *Mamma Roma*. This space has the cavernous proportions typical of Italian interiors, and the look of continuing erosion favoured by the Italian upper classes, for whom this appearance of a long history gives domestic architecture something of the dignity of Roman ruins. Here



Breakfast in the villa





several things happen: one of the fuckers – Umberto Chessari, though he's called Efisio in this scene, for some reason – trips one of the naked 'wives' serving breakfast, and rapes her from behind, on the floor behind the central table; on the wall, we see the shadow of a huge penis lowering itself to the height of the girl's shadow and poking into it; Durcet drops his pants, exhibits his ass to the company to much hilarity, then squats beside the rape-in-progress and orders Efisio to bugger him; Efisio effortlessly transfers his thrusts from the girl's ass to Durcet's; Vaccari then summons two guards and marches out of the room, returning with a seated wooden dummy in a white suit attached to a chair; Blangis begins singing a fascist anthem, which the others gradually join in singing; finally, a 'masturbation demonstration' is made on the dummy's wooden cock. We see that agency isn't solely invested in the four libertines; their accomplices can originate independent activities,

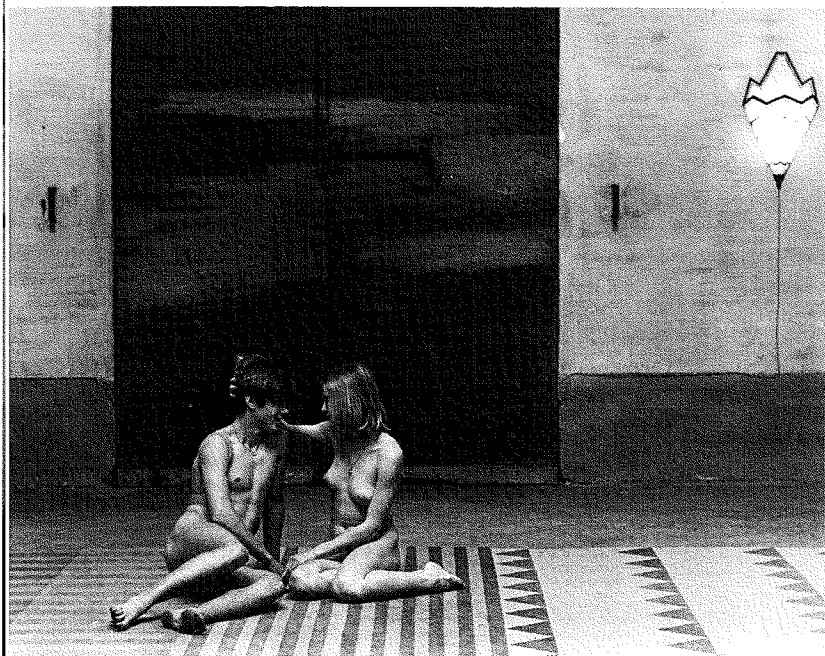
Efisio prepares to rape the waitress

rape and humiliate the members of the harems on their own initiative; more significantly, many of the victims join in the singing, implicitly accepting themselves as part of the system that's produced their situation.

On the following evening, before Vaccari commences her narration, the body of the girl who tried to escape is exhibited, her throat slashed, at the base of a Madonna-and-child altarpiece frescoed in an alcove in the Orgy Hall. Durcet now tells another joke involving numbers. Blangis claps and calls for music; the piano strikes up; Vaccari struts back and forth before the corpse, reciting. As she speaks of revealing her ass to a customer, Durcet drops a girl over his lap, lifts her pleated skirt and fondles her ass through her panties. 'How could we determine the true sex of a boy or girl?' he wonders. 'Their best part, in other words?' Blangis immediately proposes 'masturbation of the respective body parts' on 'the youngsters about whom we still have doubts'.

This dubious exchange leads to a scene in the 'last room' of the villa, another cavernous chamber where the Bauhaus geometry of the carpeting extends the perspective of extreme shot-counter-shot, the libertines at one end of the long room, watching Vaccari and 'Guido' (a fucker elsewhere called Rinaldo – confusions of naming run all through the film) at the other, bend over Renata and Sergio. Blangis says he is inspired 'to a series of interesting reflections', namely, 'We fascists are the only true anarchists.' 'The obscene gesticulation is like deaf-mute's language, with a code none of us, despite unrestrained caprice, can transgress.'

Sergio comes. 'He's a man!' Guido announces. 'And here's a woman,' says Vaccari – Renata is clinging to Vaccari's shoulders. In the next scene, the two are 'married', in the same room, wearing conventional wedding costumes. The remainder of the boy and girl harems parade in behind them, all naked, holding large white calla lilies. The Bishop begins the ceremony (cropped to the minimum required performative speech) as Blangis moves among the naked youths, fondling and kissing at random. His favourite boy lingers over a kiss. 'What a whore,' he says. He grabs the courtesans, paws and tongue-kisses the fuckers, everyone laughing throughout. Everything belies the solemnity of Renata's and Sergio's exchange of vows, and the Bishop completes the atmosphere of travesty



by screaming for everyone to leave the moment after the perfunctory ritual. The libertines viciously shove people into the stairwell regardless of rank, and slam the doors on them.

'Get going, idiot,' Blangis orders the boy. At the far end of the room, the couple attempt some tender fondling, as if their absurd nuptials might somehow transcend the miserable circumstances. Sergio manages an erection, but as he arranges himself on top of Renata in an attempt to penetrate her, the libertines rush forward and push him off. 'That flower is reserved for us!' Durcet mounts Renata; Blangis begins fucking Sergio; the stick-like Curval approaches in the manner of a tentative insect, then scuttles up to Blangis's raised behind, lowers Blangis's trousers, fishes in his fly for his own penis (his character, in Sade, has a pathetically small, skinny endowment), and commences fucking Blangis. This choreography is remarkably distant from any conventional type of pornography, abstract

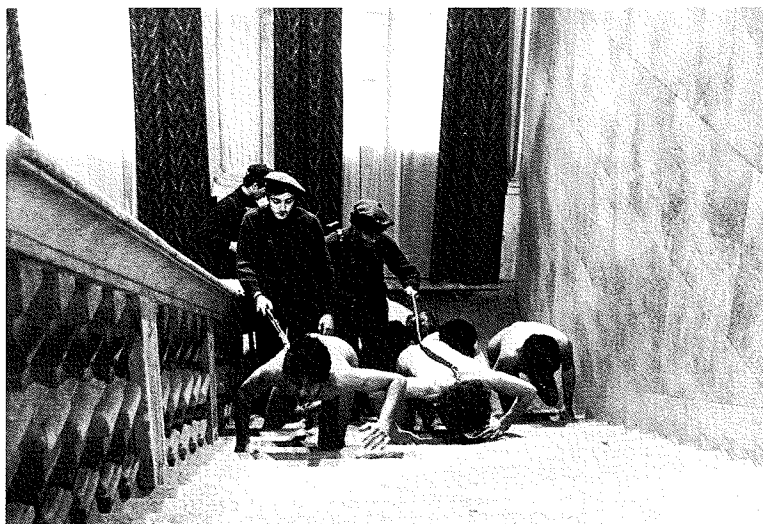
Sergio and Renata

and alien, like something occurring on the moon. The thundering noise of bomber planes passing overhead cranks the Gothic feeling up to a real frisson of nausea.

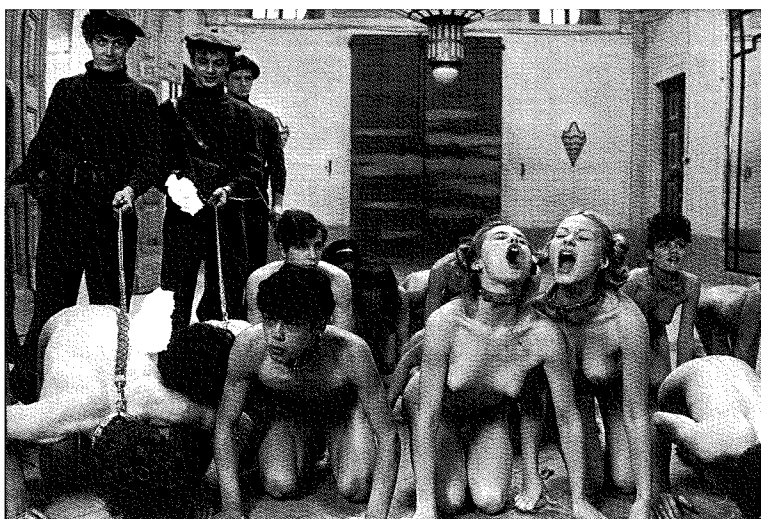
Next an interlude with just the libertines themselves, in a private suite full of tastefully designed furniture, Léger-like murals, an intriguing white globe lamp veined in red. Durcet, drunk, announces that 'without bloodshed, there's no pardon', citing this as a remark of Baudelaire's. Curval corrects him: it's from Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*. Durcet counters that it's not from Nietzsche, nor even from St Paul, but 'dada', whereon Blangis gurgles a little nonsense tune about dada. From an adjoining parlour, the Bishop pretends to address an absent lover, offering his dirty underpants 'in the spirit of delicacy'. Conversation among the libertines is always highly stylised and theatrical, and at bottom rather meaninglessly allusive, designed to strike certain notes for the audience: blood, dirty sex, their shared satisfaction in the unfolding of their plans. Pasolini notes somewhere that the destiny of the four, not depicted in the film, is to be murdered once they reach Salò (they are, apparently, some miles away from Mussolini's micro-republic), and one has the impression that for them that, too, will be just another ontological thrill, albeit the final one. It's never suggested that these men would not meet their fate at least as gamely as their victims seem to, because they're all part of the same organism, equally drained of Sartrean free will by the insane logic of their own fantasies. The staging of these fantasies is frequently likened, by one character or another in *Salò*, to battle: in other words to a situation in which one's fear of pain and death is subsumed, transformed into adrenalin.

In the Orgy Hall, another recitative by Vaccari. The victims are now naked. The libertines stand near one of the hall's many entrances, grinning. The Bishop pulls a girl victim – the one who was earlier forced to masturbate the wooden dummy – into a lavatory and compels her to watch him urinate.

Inspired by Vaccari's story of being forced by a client to compete with his dogs for bits of thrown food, a 'special event' occurs the next morning. The naked victims scramble on all fours up a marble staircase to



The consumer society



reduced to its essentials

another grand hall, some straining at leashes held by the uniformed guards. The libertines toss bits of food from a table; they bark and lunge at the scraps. Some eat from metal doggie bowls on the floor. A reluctant boy is attacked by Curval with a bullwhip, who breaks into a sweat from the exertion, and then pats a handful of little nails into a gob of cake and offers it to one of the daughter-wives, who gobbles it unawares until the nails rip into her mouth. Blood pours between her lips.

Vaccari offers her final tale in the Orgy Hall, wearing a large white orchid in her hair. Kneeling on the floor near one of the libertines, Graziella, in close-up, tells Eva that she can't go on. Eva embraces her. Vaccari's face in close-up fades to the title card for 'The Circle of Shit'

The puzzling way that this first set of episodes within the villa, and the film as a whole, holds together suggests that Pasolini had a much surer grasp of how to keep the viewer psychologically in thrall than how to construct a coherent narrative from this material; as with many films, it acquires a contingent logic merely because of this enthrallment. *Salò* resists ordinary synopsis. Every scene is a kind of crowd scene, the whole cast is almost always present, there are no dramatic 'developments' between monadic protagonists, but rather a generalised, malignant energy field generated between oppressors and victims; the little threads of characterological continuity add up to nothing resembling a series of subplots; the victims are at one minute like children playing a game without a clue to its meaning, at another brutalised, but they remain, in either case, merely 'bodies in space'. Sergio, who gets an unusual amount of camera time – he is 'married' twice, first to Renata, then to Curval – ought to develop into a 'character', but instead remains a comely, blank, sexualised lump of flesh. The courtesans get to be 'actresses' for the others, and since they are played by actresses, bring histrionic panache to their recitations, yet they continue to be ciphers under their magnificent gowns and garish stage make-up. *Salò* is a ghost-play performed by the dead, or perhaps more accurately a type of folklore. In the tales of the Brothers Grimm, we find no end of generic characters who have to perform seemingly impossible and absurd deeds to win an equally generic princess, or else be killed by her father, the generic king; people are

beheaded or changed into crows without any fanfare, carrying with them nothing more than the nominal identity of their first names. These tales reflect the dream life of the human race rather than the monadologic drama of novelistic characters.

15

Once upon a time, four evil men captured eighteen boys and girls and brought them to a haunted castle ... In place of novelistic narrative, Pasolini invokes much earlier forms of cinema: tableaux vivants, pantomime, primitive montage, the static camera framing a proscenium. Instead of the usual lead and supporting actors, *Salò* presents an animated frieze, a series of figure-ground manipulations within the pictorial space of the villa, which is itself an elaborate meditation on the organisation of space in Renaissance perspective and its contribution to the organisation of life under capitalism.



In the absence of psychology, the victims are merely bodies in space, ghosts, creatures of fable, elements in a frieze

Pasolini avoids an extreme to which he might easily have gone: there are no shots of penetration in *Salò*, only discreet simulations – the shadow of Efsio's cock, etc. Every sexual act has an awkward and ugly appearance. The brio of the courtesans is never less than grotesque. And the private banter of the libertines is paralytically banal. It's like a Francis Bacon painting come to life.

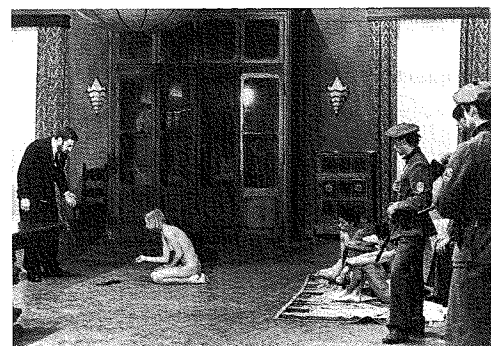
Salò 'develops' like a mathematical equation. The education of the victims progresses from daily nudity, occasional fondling and the threat of punishment, to acts that are only sexual in their aspect of profanation: for example, those involving the excretory functions, and later the mutilation of living bodies. While Renata and Sergio appear to be raped by the libertines after their wedding, curiously, none of the other victims is actually penetrated during these 'orgies'. It isn't clear if we should infer that such actions take place during those hours of each day which are not accounted for by the narrative, or rather the opposite: namely, that their absence indicates a prohibition, or the libertines' exacting distaste for sexual intercourse of any kind – which, fantastic as it may be in light of the film's overall premise, is what we are more likely to infer while watching it. Nothing in *Salò* points to an abridgement of significant action; as in Sade, virtually everything important is enunciated in the baldest terms. In Sade's novel, however, oral and anal penetration occur on practically every page, in ever more complicated, gymnastic combinations. Here, instead, the signifying actions have become something else, lubricity has been rendered a vestigial ingredient in the will to power rather than its *raison d'être*. The misery inflicted on the other is no longer a mere aphrodisiac, but an end in itself, pleasure detached from orgasm. During Signora Maggi's first turn as storyteller, Blangis defecates on the floor, then forces Renata to eat his bowel movement, a scene followed by preparations for a faecal wedding feast. The libertines declare that 'nothing should be wasted', that their guests' faeces will be collected in a large tub, in order to 'give our beloved President the joy of his dream come true'. Degradation is the goal rather than the means of achieving something else.

Signora Maggi's stories all involve coprophilia, considered by the courtesans and libertines to be the supreme culinary delicacy. For Maggi's



debut in the Orgy Hall, the fuckers appear barechested, sprawled in chairs and slouched against walls in stereotype poses of street hustlers, massive prosthetic members ballooning their loose pants; the boys are in white briefs, the girls in thin blue dresses. As Maggi narrates, the fuckers are groped and stroked like totems. Maggi relates that on one occasion, her mother begged her not to go out to a client, and to change her ways. 'I couldn't resist temptation ... so I killed her' Blangis then tells the company that he, too, once had a mother who inspired the same feelings, and that as soon as he could, he 'sent her to the next world'. Renata begins weeping 'I'll tell you why she weeps,' Vaccari says indifferently. 'Remember that her mother died trying to save her.' Blangis, excited, taunts Renata with an offer of comfort. 'Please respect my grief,' Renata begs. 'Signora Maggi's tale must be acted upon at once!' Blangis says. Renata, grasping what this means, continues to sob; Blangis orders the guards to undress her. Renata calls upon God, instantly earning an entry in the punishment-book. Blangis then moves to the centre of the room and, his lower half masked by the

Courtesan Maggi



edge of the central table, squats, lowers his head in concentration. After a moment the shot changes to a side view, showing us that he's defecated on the floor. He now orders the naked Renata to eat his turd, screaming 'Mange, mange' as she cringes and weeps and finally crawls over to it. Blangis hands her a demitasse spoon: 'Here, use this.' Renata finally obeys, bringing the spoon to her mouth as Blangis continues screaming at her (This is the most notoriously unforgettable moment in *Salò*, a point of no return. After a quarter century it is still shocking and unassimilable in its raw cruelty, perhaps because it is extremely funny as well as horrific, and prods us to share Pasolini's wicked sense of humour, of the same variety as Oscar Wilde's remark that 'only a person with a heart of stone could read the death of Little Nell without laughing') Durcet, aroused, retires to a lavatory and masturbates while looking into a large mirror.

Copromania





In anticipation of the banquet of shit, Durcet makes the rounds of the dormitories, which appear to occupy a separate wing of the villa, reached via a narrow flight of exterior cement stairs. He inspects the chamber-pots of the girls, discovers that blonde Doris has defecated without permission, and enters her name in the ever-hovering punishment-book. In the boys' dormitory, he finds a similar violation in the bowl of Carlo Porro, the boy whose grins mocked the libertines during the selections. 'Want some?' he asks Durcet with the same insouciance. Rino, the tall ringleted boy Blangis has taken on as his favourite, is ordered to lower Carlo's pants. Already complicit with the libertines in the hope of escaping the fate of the others, he does so without hesitation. Durcet inspects Carlos's ass: 'You even had the impertinence to wipe it.' Vaccari appears in the doorway with Sergio, who's now dressed in a bridal ensemble, ready for his marriage to Curval.

At the wedding table, Signora Castelli and others sniff the aroma of the oncoming feast as if savouring an exquisite perfume. Everyone is in formal dress, except the daughter-wives, who enter naked, with Signora Maggi supervising the presentation of the meal: the lid of a large spherical silver vessel is rolled back to reveal a huge pile of turds. In the background, one of the guards gags uncontrollably, while the shit is served out on plates of fine china.

Even if you know they're eating chocolate, this scene is hard to take. In a few shots, we see Signora Maggi digging into her serving with gusto; Curval spooning shit into Sergio's mouth; Durcet telling a joke to Carlo Porri with faeces dripping out of his mouth; Graziella telling Eva, again, 'I can't go on' – this time Eva, gagging on a forkful of shit, tells her to 'offer it up to the Virgin' – and a close-up of a turd on a plate. Then a shot of Curval and Sergio, the latter still in the bridal outfit, staggering up a staircase. Curval pauses to plant a smeary brown kiss on Sergio's forehead.

At the very least, this is something we've never seen before in the movies, except for the gloriously gross moment at the end of *Pink Flamingos* when Divine scoops up and eats an actual dog turd. In John Waters's film, the scene was shot in a way that establishes that the excrement is real – this is the entire point of the scene, as Divine's



character is competing for the status of 'the filthiest person alive'. The salient point of *Salò*'s banquet is not whether we believe the shit is real, but the fact that everyone has to eat it, regardless of his placement in the hierarchy; those at the top are obliged to demonstrate sophisticated connoisseurship of this most rarefied of meals, and to scoff at the disgust of those below them, like aristocrats amused by a peasant's aversion to caviar. In this connection, Pasolini's characterisation of the scene as a metaphor for the consumer society and its processed foods doesn't sound entirely frivolous. As a model of capitalism, in fact, the consumption of one's own and other people's waste could not be more precise, suggesting as it does the exhaustion of less toxic forms of nourishment as well as a reversion to cannibalism. Everyone in the villa is eating everyone else, supposedly to give them 'strength for the battle ahead'.

The banquet is followed by another evening of Maggi's narration. The wives are crouched naked on the stairs; Maggi dances briefly with the Bishop; she relates her adventure with a customer 'on the verge of death' and already laid out in his coffin, who wanted to consume her shit with his

Preparations for a wedding feast



dying breath. This is punctuated by a scene with Blangis on the floor of the lavatory vestibule, with a girl named Antoniska in a semi-squat above him, pissing all over his beard and into his mouth. We next see the libertines, guards, fuckers and others in a stairwell, waiting at a closed door, Blangis pounding on the door impatiently. They're admitted to a lit room that immediately goes dark. Maggi has arranged the naked boys and girls in a tight herd, on hands and knees, so that only their asses are revealed as the libertines inspect them by flashlight. As they consider the anonymous behinds, the Bishop proposes that whoever is found to have the most beautiful ass should be immediately killed. A winner is chosen – Franco Merli – the lights come on, one of the fuckers holds a pistol to Franco's temple, pulls the trigger. The gun isn't loaded: Franco is told that to satisfy their lust, the libertines would have to be able to kill him again and again.

During Maggi's final story, the lights in the Orgy Hall are lowered. She wears a tight veil as she tells of a client who paid her to obtain stools from women who had been sentenced to death, maintaining that 'there

The spirit of delicacy

could not be finer stools than those of a woman who has just heard her death sentence'. A close-up of Maggi's face dissolves to the title card for the 'Circle of Blood'.

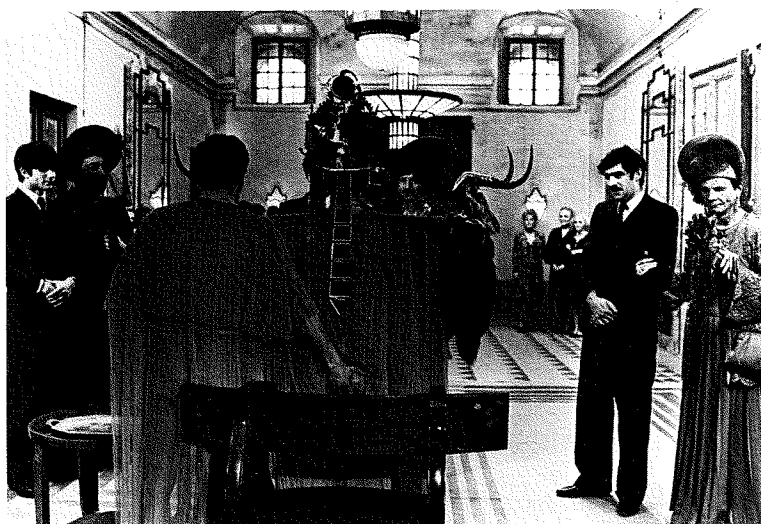
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This final movement of *Salò* moves comparatively quickly: Blangis, Durcet and Curval are shown in the muralled parlour fussing with their elaborate drag clothes. They're wearing big hats, expensive-looking period dresses, illusion veils, fluffy bows, large pendant earrings. In the grand hall upstairs, the Bishop is also in drag, liturgical in his case, a filmy red vestment ornamented down the front by twin rows of large square mirrors attached to a sort of alb across the shoulders by rams' heads with curled antlers, the ensemble suggesting something out of Aleister Crowley. His fucker serves as altar boy, wearing a similar red frock without the bangles.

The boys and girls are again in their Sunday clothes. The pianist stands near the altar area playing a wedding dirge on an accordion. We see the 'brides' ascending the stairs outside, Blangis yelling that he wants a wedding with all the trimmings. Cut to the Bishop muttering, 'The sons of



The brides and the bachelors



bitches.' As soon as the libertines enter, Blangis terrorises the children by bellowing that none of them looks happy, that they're all parasites, etc.

The pianist rescues the occasion by putting down her accordion and rushing up to Signora Vaccari. 'Femmes Femmes', they trill in unison. And for a minute or so, standing before a vertiginous Deco mirror that reflects its double on the opposite wall, and thus duplicated to infinity, they recreate a scene that the actresses, Hélène Surgère and Sonia Saviange, performed in the Paul Vecchiali movie: an unhappy woman with no money is told by her friend that she will have to 'write something', some banter passes back and forth, the friend begins screaming as if in pain, the other mockingly imitates her until they both break into laughter. This brings laughter to the victims, equilibrium is restored, the pianist returns to her accordion, the weddings proceed. This time no vows are uttered. As the Bishop mumbles some litany or other, each libertine approaches with his fucker, who takes two rings from a tray, places one on his libertine's finger, and has one placed on his finger in turn. As the Bishop drones, his fucker grabs and squeezes his buttocks through the red robe.

Cut to: the Bishop's bedroom, the Bishop's bed, in the dark, the

A wedding with all the trimmings

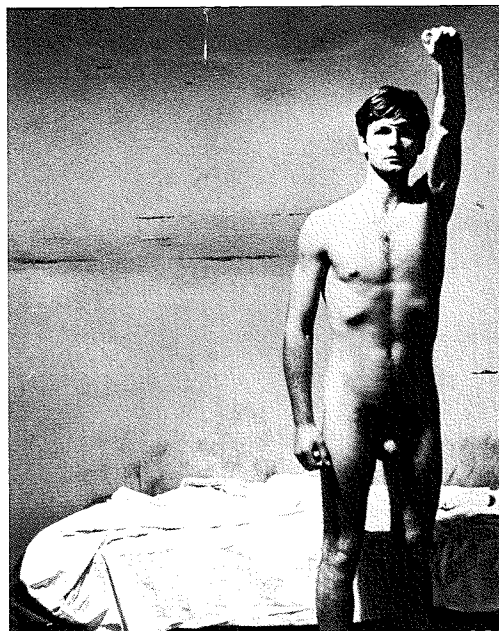
Bishop's fucker fucking him very energetically: the only scene in which the 'private lives' of the individual libertines is adumbrated. In a frenzy of fucking the hitched bodies roll off the bed, where they continue fucking on the carpet. Someone comes. They stand. Kiss passionately. The Bishop tells his lover to 'wait till I've done my duty'. The fucker assures him that 'my friend and I are always ready'. He helps the Bishop on with his robe, his holster and pistols, his slippers: as he kneels to put them on the Bishop's feet, an organ of truly heroic proportions is visible between his legs. Another kiss. Blangis walks out of the room.

In the next shot he enters the boys' dormitory, looks around. As he's going out to the next passage a boy grabs his arm. 'I have to talk to you.' 'Speak.' 'What will you do to me tomorrow?' 'Many things will be decided tomorrow.' 'I know someone who betrays your laws. Graziella has a photo under her pillow.'

What follows has the exact structure of a fairy tale – Rapunzel promising her first child to Rumpelstiltskin if he will thread the straw into gold and save her life. Graziella refuses the photo, relents: a picture of a boy on a bicycle. 'If you spare me, I'll show you what Eva and Antoniska do to break your rules.' Eva and Antoniska are surprised in the middle of



Normal love



lovmaking. Eva: 'If you kill me, I can't tell you what you don't know – that Ezio makes love to the black maid every night.' Next the libertines burst in on Ezio and the maid, Ezio springs to his feet, the libertines point their guns, Ezio raises his fist in the communist salute: stunned, the libertines lower their weapons, the camera lingers on Ezio's defiance, then Blangis pushes forward and shoots him, emboldening the others to do the same. The maid has crouched beside a plain wooden chair; Blangis steps over to her and kills her with a single shot.

The cycle of betrayal spares no one. It merely indicates how quickly things are running to their end, and how readily people sell each other out in the face of death. Ezio's bravery is singular and absurd, and it is impossible to tell what Pasolini intended by the strange power exerted by his upraised fist: that only the inhumanly decent, or members of the Communist Party, fought against fascism without compromise? That the symbolism is as ridiculous as it appears? I have avoided discussing the

A singular act of defiance

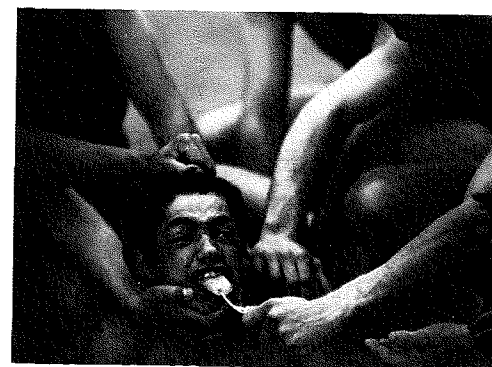
infamous position Pasolini took vis-à-vis the student uprisings of 1968, a position that seemed to reify the traditional postwar order of politics in Italy: that only the Communist Party had the possibility of implementing progressive reforms, that the students represented the bourgeoisie's reformation-minded revolt against itself, etc., etc., etc. Over three decades have passed, analysis tells us that 1968 was insufficient, flawed, even doomed, that too many confused motives were in play, that even Marcuse and Adorno had not adequately measured the ingenious powers of co-optation available to capitalism. And yet it is difficult not to see Ezio's gesture and its (momentarily) paralysing effect on Evil as an invocation of Guido, the idealised partisan, and to remember that Guido was, in fact, killed by other communists – and from there to consider Pasolini's lifelong dialogue with the PCI, in which this moment figures as an especially obsequious epiphany, as the same sort of tormented masochism that plays out in *Salò* to its bitter, logical end. And, looked at in this way, Pasolini's own end has an unfortunate logic that has nothing to do with conspiracies of the far right, cabals of the Trilateral Commission or the perfervid imaginations of Oriana Fallaci, Laura Betti, Alberto Moravia, et al.

In the morning the victims are lined up: wife-daughters naked as usual, the boys and girls in their school uniforms. The guards, in civilian clothes, taunt them and mime mowing them down with a machine gun. Enter libertines, courtesans, fuckers. Blangis calls off their names as he walks in front of them. He skips Rino. 'Those will wear a blue ribbon and they can imagine what is in store for them. The others could come with us to *Salò*' Carlo Porro: 'What have we done?' 'Now you will learn the seriousness of breaking our rules.' The pianist is seen to hold a tray piled with blue ribbons. Curval plucks one from the pile and holds it out.

That night, Castelli gives her first and only recitation, the pianist accompanying her with music that sounds like Alban Berg, or possibly Schoenberg: in any case something modern and dissonant and menacing. The population in the Orgy Room has been reduced to the libertines, their fuckers in white chinos, white shirts, white shoes and socks, the other courtesans; and Rino, the only victim spared in the morning's

selection. The note here is 'café society', the hierarchical groupings have been dismantled, the libertines sit cozily with their fuckers on little banquettes, sharing splits of champagne. Off in the lavatory, the others are bound together on the floor of the vestibule, except the libertines' daughters, who've been placed in a large wooden tub full of excrement (which seems to have migrated, decades later, into Spielberg's *Schindler's List*). 'God,' screams one of the daughters, 'why have you forsaken me?' In a corner by the door, the guards play cards, like the soldiers at the bottom of Christ's cross ...

Castelli tells of a fabulous libertine and his devices to tear the flesh from his victims; how he sews mice up in their vaginas; kicks them through a trapdoor into his basement torture chamber. Castelli's recitation is replete with gales of sinister laughter, suddenly narrowed eyes and murderous expressions; Caterina Boratto's performance is brief but sharp as a razor, a little study in controlled psychosis that easily trumps everyone else in the movie. She concludes by saying that it's not enough to kill 1,000 victims, one should kill as many living beings as possible



Suiting action to the word, the libertines set about destroying their delicate prey, in the villa's courtyard, by means of gallows, branding irons, garottes, swords and knives, taking turns as voyeur from the window of an upstairs parlour where framed Cubist and Vorticist paintings and drawings cover the walls. Equipped with binoculars, seated in a throne-like chair that resembles, from behind, the armature of a fantastic black insect, and attended by the guards (who are expected to demonstrate tumescence on a moment's notice), first Blangis, then Durcet, and finally Curval observe their colleagues at play below: through the binoculars, we see Durcet burning a boy's penis with a candle; Renata staked to the ground, her head pulled back by the fuckers, as Durcet burns her breasts; then an

The victims are slaughtered in the courtyard

interlude in which the pianist, still playing in the deserted Orgy Hall, suddenly stops, gets up, crosses out of the room, goes up the staircase leading to the dormitories, crosses a room to a window, opens it, leans out on the ledge, presumably sees what is happening in the courtyard, gasps, brings her hand to her mouth, and in a continuation of the same motion hurls herself out of the window; in another shot we see her body sprawled on the paving below. Through the binoculars again, Durcet is shown cutting off Franco's tongue. Two soldiers who've recently left the parlour rape one of Blangis's daughters. They hustle her over to the gallows; Blangis turns the binoculars around and watches her hanging in miniature.

Durcet watches through the binoculars as Curval cuts out Rino's left eye. On the radio, *Poetry Corner: Ezra Pound*. We hear Pound's voice reciting Canto 99 of his magnum opus. Curval buggers a staked victim. Then, with assistance from the fuckers, he scalps her with a thick sword.

Orff's *Carmina Burana* (a big favourite with the Nazis) issues from the radio. The Bishop, his face bright red, has worked himself into a lather and begins whipping unidentifiable figures in the courtyard.

The Bishop, Curval and Blangis kick up their heels in a display of chorus-line dancing, summoning the brainless avidity of countless MGM musicals.

Sergio is restrained by the fuckers while the Bishop sears off his nipples with a heated iron. The Bishop sniffs the tip of the iron appreciatively.

The guard Claudio fiddles with the knob of a radio a few feet away from Durcet's viewing throne. 'These Foolish Things' comes on. He asks the other guard on duty, 'Can you dance?' 'No.' 'Let's try.' 'A bit.' They begin awkwardly waltzing, back and



There are numerous indications that everyone will be annihilated by the end of the day



forth before the framed paintings. 'What's your girlfriend's name?' Claudio asks. 'Margarita,' the other replies. They continue dancing. The shot dissolves to the film's closing title.

17

There are numerous indications in these final scenes that *everyone* will be annihilated by the end of the day. The courtesans are whipped along with the others, the fuckers try out the garotte on one of their own, Rino's complicity turns out not to have spared him at all. This is, in any case, *Salò's* logic and *Salò's* polemic: we live in a machine that will kill master and slave alike, though the masters, of course, are always the last to go. *Salò* is the pessimistic forerunner of *The Matrix*: despite the lavish and hideous verisimilitude Roland Barthes noted about the film, it's really about a less sensational, even more frightening reality produced by the intricate equation it proposes. It would be a gross mistake to read the final shot as 'hopeful', since these two boys, who have, in fact, implicitly survived the storm, are completely the products of its ferocity, with some lingering traces of their earlier, bovine existences. After the war they'll get married, reproduce themselves and raise good consumers; their children won't need fascism to learn how to think alike, just TV and the supermarket. For all the overblown, pretentious and even corny ideas that Pasolini regularly brought to the cinema, in *Salò*, I think, he hit a

nerve that hasn't gone numb since the film first appeared. The theatres and video stores of the Western world offer a glut of more violent, more sexually explicit, more frankly disgusting movies that hardly anyone objects to, but *Salò* remains, to borrow a phrase, *off the reservation*, proscribed, unacceptable. One can argue with its monotony, its internal inconsistencies and its didacticism, but its power to disturb something buried very deep in each of us is beyond question. *Salò* is the very model of life as most human beings have known it in the 20th century, a metaphor of feudalism as reinvented by the multinational corporation, the military *coup d'état* and the mediation of all reality via the symbolic.



Notes

1 Barth David Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem*, (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp 650–1

2 Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), p 675

3 Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary, Vol. 2 (1957–1961)*, ed Jan Kott, trans Lillian Vallee (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), p 88

4 Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem*, p 661 'I did not say that was a world only good: I said that it was a world that was neither good nor bad, but that it was also good I don't believe in this business of a "good world": I am talking about a world that had certain values, which also gave great things I don't know, they gave the Duomo of Orvieto and that sweetness of the Friulian peasants who, at the risk of their lives, took bread to the soldiers'

5 Sam Rohdie, *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press/BFI Publishing, 1995), p 113

6 Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Observations on the Sequence Shot', in Louise K. Barnett (ed.), *Heretical Empiricism*, trans Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp 233–7

7 For a blunt-instrument defence of the kind of by-the-numbers film-making Hollywood favours, see David Mamet's *On Directing Film* (London: Faber, 1992) Mamet, of course, ridicules everything about Hollywood in this short screed, but insists on the same allegedly 'Aristotelian' unities that every Hollywood hack translates into 'throughlines', 'back stories', 'arcs', 'three acts' and so on. In other words, his quibbles with Hollywood are entirely egomaniacal rather than systemic. I do not admire the films of Werner Herzog, who gets a mild hazing in this book, but

compared to Mamet's competent, slick and cynical impersonations of Sam Shepard, Herzog begins to look like Eisenstein

8 Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Trilogy of Life Rejected', in *Lutheran Letters*, trans Stuart Hood (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1987), pp 49–52

9 'Let us consider: in a film a shot appears of a boy with black curly hair and black laughing eyes, a face covered with acne, a slightly swollen throat and an amusing, festive expression which emanates from his entire being. Does this shot of a film perhaps refer to a social pact made of symbols yes but this social pact cannot be distinguished from reality, that is, from the real Ninetto Davoli in flesh and blood reproduced in that shot.' Pasolini, 'Being Natural', in *Heretical Empiricism*, p 238. Such lucubrations indicate how cinema is, unhappily, a perfect medium for an artist to compromise his craft by directly inserting into it the objects of his private desires, whether or not the audience can ever see in them what the artist does. Pasolini deserves credit for foregrounding his relationship – regardless of its masochistic, unfulfilling nature – with Davoli, who was not from the class in which the director's chic friends thought he should look for a boyfriend, and for his public frankness about this infatuation. On the other hand, the inability to distinguish a trick from a muse has spoiled many a movie. The only rotten note in the near-perfect *Teorema* is Davoli doing his 'childlike' number as the postman.

10 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *A Future Life* (Rome: Associazione Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1989)

11 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Reflections before a Glass Cage,' in *Politics and Crime* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), p 29

12 Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem*, p. 649 'One of these guards was played by Claudio Troccoli, the teenage son of peasants living near Chia. His curly hair and pimpled skin reminded those who saw him of a less animated version of Ninetto.'

13 Dennis Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1983), pp. 306–7

14 Pasolini, *A Future Life*, pp. 181–5

15 Roland Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997)

16 Gideon Bachman, 'Pasolini on de Sade', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 29 no. 2, Winter 1975–6

Credits

**Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma/
Salo ou les 120 journées de Sodome/
Pasolini's 120 Days of Sodom**

Italy/France
1975

Director

Pier Paolo Pasolini

Producer

Alberto Grimaldi

Screenplay

Pier Paolo Pasolini

Director of Photography

Tonino Delli Colli

Supervising Editor

Enzo Ocone

Art Director

Dante Ferretti

Music Consultant

Ennio Morricone

Production Companies

Alberto Grimaldi presents
a film by Pier Paolo Pasolini
a co-production of PEA
Produzioni Europee
Associate S.p.A.
(Rome)/Les Productions
Artistes Associés S.A.
(Paris)

Production Manager

Antonio Girasante

Production Supervisor

Alberto De Stefanis

Unit Managers

Alessandro Mattei, Renzo

David, Angelo Zemella

Production Accountants

Maurizio Forti,

Piero Innocenti

Assistant Production

Secretary

Vittorio Cudia

Assistant Director

Umberto Angelucci

2nd Assistant Director

Fiorella Infascelli

Continuity

Beatrice Banfi

Screenplay Collaborator

Sergio Citti

Cameramen

Carlo Tafani, Emilio Bestetti

1st Assistant Cameraman

Sandro Battaglia

2nd Assistant

Cameraman

Giancarlo Granatelli

Stills Photographer

Deborah Beer

Editor

Nino Baragli

Assistant Editor

Ugo De Rossi

2nd Assistant Editor

Alfredo Menchini

Set Dresser

Osvaldo Desideri

Costumes

Daniilo Donati

Costume Assistant

Vanni Castellani

Costumes Created by

Sartoria Farani

Make-up

Alfredo Tiberi

Hairstylist

Giuseppina Bovino

Wigs/Special Make-up

Effects

Carboni-Rocchetti

Shoes

Ditta Pompei

Pianoforte Performed by

Arnaldo Graziosi

Sound

Domenico

Pasquadibisceglie,

Giorgio Loviscek

Boom Operator

Giuseppina Sagliano

Post Synchronisation

International Recording

(Rome)

Mixer

Fausto Ancillai

Sound Effects

Luciano Anzellotti

Unit Publicity

Nico Naldini

Essential Bibliography

Roland Barthes: 'Sade, Fourier, Loyola' (Editions du Seuil); Maurice Blanchot: 'L'autréamont et Sade' (Editions de Minuit; in Italy Dedalo Libri); Simone de Beauvoir: 'Faut-il brûler Sade' (Editions Gaimard); Pierre Klossowski: 'Sade mon prochain, le philosophe scélérat' (Editions du Seuil; in Italy SugarCo Edizioni); Philippe Sollers: 'L'écriture et l'expérience des limites' (Editions du Seuil)

Cast

Paolo Bonacelli
Blangis, libertine

Giorgio Cataldi

The Bishop, libertine

Umberto P. Quintavalle

Curval, libertine

Aldo Valletti

Durcet, libertine

Caterina Boratto

Signora Castelli,
courtesan-narrator

Elsa De Giorgi

Signora Maggi,
courtesan-narrator

Hélène Surgère

Signora Vaccari,
courtesan-narrator

Sonia Saviange

the virtuoso,
courtesan-narrator

Sergio Fascetti

Bruno Musso

Antonio Orlando

Claudio Cicchetti

Franco Merli

Umberto Chessari

Lamberto Book

Gaspard Di Jenno

male victims

Giuliana Melis

Faridah Malik

Graziella Anicento

Renata Moar

Dorit Henke

Antiniscia Nemour

Benedetta Gaetani

Olga Andreis

female victims

Tatiana Mogilansky

Susanna Radaelli

Giuliana Orlandi

Liana Acquaviva

daughters

Rinaldo Missaglia

Giuseppe Patruno

Guido Galletti

Efisio Etzi

soldiers

Claudio Troccoli

Fabrizio Menichini

Maurizio Valaguzza

Ezio Manni

collaborators

Paola Pieracci

Carla Terlizzi

Anna Maria Dossena

Anna Recchimuzzi

Ines Pellegrini

servants

[uncredited]

Marco Bellocchio

dubbed voice of

Aldo Valletti

Laura Betti

dubbed voice of

Hélène Surgère

Michel Piccoli

dubbed voice of

Paolo Bonacelli in

French language version

10,449 feet

118 minutes

Colour by

Technicolor

Credits compiled by Markku
Salmi, BFI Filmographic Unit

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